
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 1241
Labor and Employment - Bereavement Leave - Qualified Relationships
Government, Labor, and Elections Committee
February 26, 2026

Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly supports HB 1241, which will expand the loved ones' deaths upon which an employee is allowed to use earned paid bereavement leave – from an “immediate family” member to a set of “qualified relationships”. This bill makes simple changes to the current bereavement leave statute, recognizing that family support systems are diverse, and the experience of grief and challenges of losing a close family member are not narrowly confined. HB 1241 promotes family, health, equity, and dignity for grieving Maryland workers.

HB 1241 will support working Marylanders' families by making bereavement leave more inclusive of the needs of diverse Maryland families. Close family bonds can take many forms, yet many relationships remain excluded from legal recognition. Of states that have bereavement leave laws, Maryland has the most restrictive definition of a qualifying relationship.ⁱ Maryland's current bereavement law recognizes only three relationships under the Maryland Flexible Leave Act: spouse, parent, and child. This limited definition is not inclusive of the diverse realities of Marylanders' lives and families. Many Marylanders are raised by grandparents, rely on siblings as primary sources of support, and cultivate lives with domestic partners and chosen family. Upon the death of loved ones with whom they are connected in these ways, employees are currently not protected by state law in using paid leave to grieve or handle arrangements. HB 1241 expands the relationships covered by existing bereavement policy to include immediate family, grandparents, domestic and de facto relations, and step, adoptive and foster relations. Considering the ways that close ties to extended, blended, and chosen families are particularly common in communities of color and LGBTQIA+ communities, this is an issue of fairness. HB 1241 will address this gap in current law.

HB 1241 promotes both the health and wellbeing of working Marylanders, and public health. The death of a beloved family member – whether family by blood or by choice – is an extremely painful experience that often has a profound impact on one's well-being, and unsupported grief can lead to a range of negative mental health outcomes – including elevated risks of depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, and suicide, as well as diminished work functioning.ⁱⁱ Having opportunities to participate in personally and culturally meaningful grief rituals and receive support is critical for one's ability to successfully navigate the loss. A 2020 systematic review found consistent evidence that informal social support is associated with a reduced risk of depression and PTSD following certain losses.ⁱⁱⁱ Meaningful social support necessitates time, which for many requires the ability to temporarily step away from work and other responsibilities. Without protected leave, workers may be forced to return to work before they have stabilized emotionally or

practically.

HB 1241 recognizes the practical and emotional challenges of losing a close family member. The period immediately following a loss includes not only the complex emotional experiences of grief; it also involves practical adjustments to one's life without the deceased, which may include changes in roles and responsibilities. Many bereaved individuals are also tasked with handling legal and financial affairs, making funeral arrangements, and notifying others of the death. All these aspects of bereavement take time and can be extremely taxing – whether someone is an “immediate family” member or another very close relation. HB 1241 will help ensure that Maryland workers are allowed to use their paid leave to attend to these important matters.

HB 1241 is a modest, cost-neutral reform. HB 1241 does not add additional paid leave days; instead, it allows employees to use leave they have *already accrued* for a broader range of qualifying relationships. Consequently, the financial burden on employers does not increase. Indeed, paid leave policies are more often associated with favorable or neutral business outcomes than with harm, challenging the assertion that leave protections broadly damage employers.^{iv} Grief does not adhere to a legal checklist; therefore, our laws should strive for inclusivity and relevance.

HB 1241 keeps us in step with other states' policies – and our own. Other states have modernized their policies: Oregon recognizes extended blood and foster relationships; Illinois includes chosen family and reproductive loss; California permits the designation of an additional qualifying individual; and Vermont explicitly recognizes domestic partners, siblings, grandparents, and caregiving relationships.^v Maryland risks falling behind as other states adopt policies that reflect modern family structures. In fact, Maryland has adopted broader definitions of family in its Family and Medical Leave Insurance Act and Maryland Healthy Working Families Act. HB 1241 is consistent with these other important Maryland policies.

As the needs and realities of Maryland families evolve, our laws must evolve, too. Social Work Advocates for Social Change urges a favorable report on HB 1241.

Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.

ⁱ Poster Compliance Center. (30 October, 2025). Understanding State Bereavement Laws. https://www.postercompliance.com/blog/understanding-state-bereavement-leave-laws/?srsltid=AfmBOoot8FHe059CvZHtUkNn_miYfeDhk7bPfqxtWDtjr7dM6jNYyBY-. Accessed 22 February, 2026.

ⁱⁱ Lichtenthal, W. G., Roberts, K. E., Donovan, L. A., Breen, L. J., Aoun, S. M., Connor, S. R., & Rosa, W. E. (2024). Investing in bereavement care as a public health priority. *The Lancet Public Health*, 9(4), e270–e274. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(24\)00030-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(24)00030-6)

ⁱⁱⁱ Scott, H. R., Pitman, A., Kozuharova, P., & Lloyd-Evans, B. (2020). A systematic review of studies describing the influence of informal social support on psychological wellbeing in people bereaved by sudden or violent causes of death. *BMC psychiatry*, 20(1), 265. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02639-4>



For more information, please contact
Noah Offenbacher and Christine Ferris
umswasc@gmail.com

^{iv} Vander Weerd, C., Stoddard-Dare, P., & DeRigne, L. (2023). Is paid sick leave bad for business? A systematic review. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 66(6), 429–440. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.23469>

^v Poster Compliance Center (30 October, 2025).