

The Washington Area Secular Humanists, Inc.

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February 17, 2026

The Honorable Del. Melissa Wells
Chair, House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, Maryland 21404

Re: OPPOSE HB356: Human Relations - Protection of the Free Exercise of Religion

Dear Chairperson Wells and Members of the House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee:

As a representative of the Washington Area Secular Humanists (WASH), American Atheists, and a Maryland resident, I write in opposition to HB356 currently before the committee.

WASH is a regional educational and community service organization incorporated in Maryland representing non-religious persons. WASH is also an affiliate of the national civil rights organization American Atheists, which also opposes this bill.

HB356, like similar bills being introduced in other states, would provide a state-level corollary to the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). As we have seen when similar legislation became law in other states, this can create a giant loophole which allows religiously affiliated organizations and private employers to engage in otherwise unacceptable religious discrimination. As written, HB356 would make it unlawful for a governmental authority to "substantially burden a person's exercise of religion..." This may sound fair and reasonable until one considers that it could also allow employers to claim a religious exemption in order to legally exclude persons of different or no religious beliefs or LGBTQ+ persons from hiring, deny birth control from employee benefits, deny necessary medical procedures, or otherwise compel employees to comply with a particular religious viewpoint. In other states, organizations have used similar RFRA laws to claim that anti-discrimination policies and public health regulations substantially burden their free exercise of religion and therefore not have to comply with them. There have even been cases where defendants cited RFRA laws to avoid accountability for child abuse. Religious-affiliated foster care agencies receiving government funding have rejected potential foster parents because they were of a different religion.

Maryland has a long tradition of the separation of church and state and of supporting religious pluralism. Marylanders are of many faiths and of none. This bill, although probably well-intentioned, could be horribly abused as similar laws have been in other states. Religious freedom is already the norm in Maryland. We do not need this potentially dangerous law. I urge the committee to not allow HB 356 to proceed.

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael R. Reid".

Michael R. Reid

The Washington Area Secular Humanists and
Maryland State Director for American Atheists