



HOUSE GOVERNMENT, LABOR, AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE

FEBRUARY 17, 2026

HOUSE BILL 356

HUMAN RELATIONS - PROTECTION OF THE FREE EXERCISE OF RELIGION

SUPPORT

Agudath Israel of Maryland, the Mid-Atlantic regional office of Agudath Israel of America, a renowned national Jewish advocacy organization with chapters across the country, speaks on behalf of the Orthodox Jewish faith communities across Maryland and on the behalf of the many Jewish schools, synagogues, and communal organizations within our state. We stand today in support of House Bill 356.

House Bill 356 would renew our state's commitment to the rights of religious liberty enshrined in law in both the Maryland Constitution (Article 36 of the Declaration of Rights) and our National Constitution (in the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment). Under HB 356, the government would be permitted to substantially burden a person's exercise of religion **ONLY** if a) the burden is in furtherance of a compelling government interest **AND** b) that the government is pursuing the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling interest.

The importance of this bill to our religious community can be demonstrated by a hypothetical case. Suppose a city banned all headgear from city council chambers, with the intent of promoting an atmosphere of respect and decorum. Since this ban is of general applicability (as it applies to all attendees) and was not intended specifically to discriminate against any particular religious belief or practice, even religious individuals for whom a head covering is a religious practice, could be forced to remove their headgear. As such, Jews who wear kippahs or tichels, Muslims who wear hijabs or taqiyahs, and Sikhs who wear pagris or chunnis could be legally compelled to relinquish these coverings, despite their religious significance. Effectively, under the current standard, they would be legally compelled to check their religion by the door of city hall.

These concerns are not merely theoretical. In fact, in our neighboring country of Canada, the province of Quebec has aggressively restricted the wearing of religious headgear, as have several other countries around the world. House Bill 356 would provide a layer of protection for religious communities, continuing in the spirit of the Free Exercise clause of our National Constitution by strengthening the right to religious liberty. We respectfully urge you to issue a favorable report on House Bill 356. Thank you.