



Mission: To improve public health in Maryland through education and advocacy ***Vision:*** Healthy Marylanders living in Healthy Communities

WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 524
General Provisions - Commemorative Months - African Heritage Month
Committee: Government, Labor, and Elections
By: Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA)
Hearing Date: March 13, 2026

Dear Chair Wells, Vice-Chair Kerr, and Members of the House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of House Bill 524 which would establish African Heritage Month in Maryland each September.

Maryland is one of the most diverse states in the nation, and that diversity is reflected in the significant presence and contributions of people of African descent across our communities. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Maryland has more than 6.2 million residents, and approximately one-third of the population—about 31–32 percent—identifies as Black or African American.¹ Within this population are many residents who trace their heritage to countries across the African continent. American Community Survey estimates compiled by the Maryland Department of Planning indicate that Maryland is home to more than 60,000 residents of Nigerian ancestry and more than 40,000 residents of Ethiopian ancestry, along with thousands of individuals with roots in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cameroon, and other African nations.² Overall, more than 250,000 Maryland residents report Sub-Saharan African ancestry, reflecting the state’s vibrant and growing African diaspora community.³

African and African-descended residents contribute significantly to Maryland’s economic vitality and workforce. Maryland has one of the largest immigrant populations in the country, with foreign-born residents representing approximately 17 percent of the state’s population.⁴ Immigrants also represent more than one in five workers in Maryland, playing an essential role in strengthening the state’s workforce and supporting economic growth across industries. Many African immigrants and their descendants are highly educated and work in critical sectors that help drive Maryland’s economy and strengthen communities across the state. In the Washington metropolitan region, which includes several Maryland counties, approximately 35 percent of African-born residents work in management and professional occupations, including positions in science, technology, engineering, healthcare, education, and public service.⁵ In addition, a significant share of African-

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *QuickFacts: Maryland*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/maryland>

² Maryland Department of Planning. (2024). *American Community Survey 2020–2024 demographic tables for Maryland*. Maryland State Data Center.

³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). *American Community Survey 5-year estimates: Ancestry data*.

⁴ Migration Policy Institute. (2024). *State immigration data profile: Maryland*.

⁵ Population Reference Bureau. (2015). *African-born blacks in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area*.

born adults hold college degrees, with roughly four in ten having earned a bachelor's degree or higher.⁵

The contributions of African-heritage communities are particularly visible in sectors that are essential to the well-being of Maryland residents. In healthcare and public health, many physicians, nurses, researchers, and allied health professionals come from African immigrant and African-descended backgrounds, helping address workforce shortages and improve culturally responsive care for diverse populations. African-heritage professionals also play important roles in Maryland's research and innovation sectors, including biotechnology, public health research, and higher education. In addition, African-heritage entrepreneurs contribute to the state's vibrant small-business ecosystem by operating restaurants, retail businesses, professional services, and other enterprises that create jobs and support local economies.

Beyond economic contributions, African and African-descended communities enrich Maryland through cultural leadership, civic engagement, and community service. Cultural organizations, faith communities, and local events celebrate African traditions while fostering cross-cultural understanding and collaboration among Maryland residents. These activities help strengthen social cohesion and promote a sense of belonging within communities across the state.

From a public health perspective, cultural recognition and inclusion are closely linked to health equity and community well-being. Research shows that strong cultural identity, social belonging, and community engagement can positively influence mental health, social connectedness, and overall quality of life. Recognizing African Heritage Month would provide an opportunity for schools, community organizations, and public institutions to highlight the history, culture, and contributions of African and African-descended communities in Maryland. Such recognition can also encourage dialogue about the social determinants of health and the importance of building inclusive communities where all residents can thrive.

Maryland has long been a leader in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Establishing African Heritage Month would further that commitment by formally recognizing the contributions of African communities to the social, cultural, and economic fabric of our state. By encouraging educational programming and community engagement each September, this designation would help deepen public understanding of the many ways African heritage continues to shape Maryland today.

For these reasons, the Maryland Public Health Association respectfully urges the Committees to give HB524 a favorable report.

Thank you for your consideration,

Maryland Public Health Association

The Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA) is a nonprofit, statewide organization of public health professionals dedicated to improving the lives of all Marylanders through education, advocacy, and collaboration. We support public policies consistent with our vision of healthy Marylanders living in healthy, equitable, communities. MdPHA is the state affiliate of the American Public Health Association, a nearly 145-year-old professional organization dedicated to improving population health and reducing the health disparities that plague our state and our nation.

Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA)
PO Box 7045 · 6801 Oak Hall Ln · Columbia, MD 21045-9998
GetInfo@MdPHA.org www.mdpha.org 443.475.0242