



House Bill 45

*Labor and Employment - Mandatory Meetings on Religious or Political Matters -
Employee Attendance and Participation (Maryland Worker Freedom Act)*

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**
WITH AMENDMENTS

To: Government, Labor, and Elections
Committee

Date: February 19, 2026

From: Karrington Anderson

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS HB 45 WITH AMENDMENTS**. This bill prohibits an employer from disciplining, discharging, refusing to hire, or otherwise penalizing an employee or applicant who declines to attend, participate in, or listen to employer communications expressing opinions on religious or political matters.

MACo understands that the intent of HB 45 is to address mandatory workplace gatherings where employers present views on unionization, political issues, or religion. Counties respect employees' rights and are committed to maintaining workplaces that are professional, respectful, and compliant with existing labor and employment protections. However, counties seek amendments to clarify that HB 45 does not apply to state and local governmental entities.

Last year, similar legislation did not apply to public employers. While counties are not aware of widespread concerns within local government workplaces that this bill seeks to remedy, the language of HB 45 is sufficiently broad to raise significant operational and liability concerns for public employers. First, the bill's definition of "political matters" is expansive. It includes matters relating to elections, political parties, proposals to change legislation, regulations, or public policy. For counties, this could encompass discussions about pending county legislation, proposed charter amendments, budget priorities, or advocacy positions on state legislation that directly affect county operations.

Although the bill provides that a governmental unit may communicate information related to a policy of the employer or a law the employer is responsible for administering, it is unclear how the bill would apply when a county seeks to change a law, advocate for new legislation, or propose amendments. Under the bill's current language, an employee could potentially decline to attend meetings regarding proposed county legislation or policy changes, matters that may be integral to their job duties or departmental coordination.

Second, the term "employer-sponsored meeting" could be interpreted broadly. Without clarification, this could raise questions about whether routine staff meetings, briefings, or even informal workplace discussions fall within the scope of the prohibition. In particular, counties as public employers are

frequently the subject of pending legislation – and the language in HB 45 could create a virtually impossible barrier between proper and improper engagement on a county legislative consideration.

Finally, HB 45 establishes significant penalties for violations, including civil fines of up to \$10,000 for an initial violation and \$25,000 for subsequent violations, as well as potential back pay, attorney's fees, and other remedies. Given the bill's broad and vague terminology, these liability provisions create substantial risk for public employers and may invite litigation over routine workplace communications.

MACo supports the goal of protecting employees from being compelled to participate in ideological discussions unrelated to their work. However, absent clear exemptions or clarifications for governmental entities, HB 45 could create unintended consequences for counties, as public employers charged with implementing, administering, and at times advocating for public policy.

Accordingly, MACo respectfully requests that the Committee amend HB 45 to clearly exempt state and local governmental employers, or otherwise clarify its scope to avoid unintended consequences on routine governmental operations. For these reasons, MACo requests a **FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS** report for HB 45.