

SB0355 Family Law - Marriage License Applications - Appearance in Court
Judicial Proceedings – February 10, 2026
Sponsor: Senator Justin Ready
Position: Favorable with Amendments

Testimony of Heather DeWees, Clerk of the Circuit Court, Carroll County

Thank you, Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the committee, for this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 0355. For the record, my name is Heather S. DeWees, Clerk of the Circuit Court for Carroll County. I am also testifying on behalf of the Maryland Circuit Court Clerks' Association, which represents the twenty-four elected Clerks of the Circuit Court in Maryland.

I support SB 355 because fraudulent marriages can promote identity theft, property theft, and federal and state benefit theft. In my own county, there was recently a case where a woman obtained a marriage license. Then, she forged an officiant's signature. Two days later, she returned to my office where a marriage certificate and certified copies were issued to her. My office then found out that the other party on the marriage license was deceased when the woman applied for the license. My office had no way of knowing because only one party must appear to apply for a marriage license per Maryland statute. The woman was attempting to steal the deceased party's estate, and she is currently under police investigation for fraud.

There have also been allegations of an ongoing marriage fraud operation in a Maryland county involving foreign parties marrying U.S. citizens, which is currently being investigated. I am not at liberty to discuss in detail, except to say that this situation involves a significant number of questionable marriage licenses where only the foreign party is ever seen.

Under the current marriage statute, only one party to a marriage needs to appear in the Clerk's Office to obtain a marriage license. Neighboring states such as West Virginia, New

Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, and Virginia, require that both parties are present and show a government issued ID. A clerk in Maryland may never see the other party to determine if they are being coerced into the marriage, underage, or even aware that a marriage license is being issued in their name.

This bill adds a requirement that both parties to a marriage appear before the Clerk which will bring Maryland up to the same standard as all our surrounding states and most of the East Coast. It will help reduce fraudulent marriage licenses from being issued and fraudulent marriages from taking place. This bill will also thwart potential human traffickers from obtaining marriage licenses in our state for their victims.

I ask for a favorable report on SB 355, with the amendments that have already been submitted by the sponsors, and I would like to thank Senator Ready for sponsoring this bill. Thank you for the opportunity to comment, and I am available if you have any questions.