



**Maryland Association of the Deaf**  
**Written Testimony**  
**HB 216 – Criminal Law - Benefits Exploitation**  
**Tuesday, January 27, 2026**  
**Position: Favorable**

**President**

Tina Joyner

The Maryland Association of the Deaf (MDAD) is a statewide organization dedicated to protecting and advancing the rights of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Marylanders.

**Vice President**

Jacob Leffler

MDAD respectfully submits this testimony in support of House Bill 216, which establishes the felony offense of benefits exploitation. MDAD represents Deaf and hard of hearing individuals throughout Maryland, including Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing seniors, Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing people with disabilities, Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing immigrants, and Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing individuals who rely on government benefits such as Social Security, SSDI, Medicare, Medicaid, SNAP, and other public assistance programs.

**Secretary**

Payal Sweet

HB 216 addresses a serious and often hidden form of abuse that disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, including members of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing community.

**Treasurer**

Smita Kothari

Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing individuals are at heightened risk of financial exploitation due to long-standing communication barriers and reliance on others for access to services, transportation, housing, health care, and benefits administration. In many cases, exploitation occurs not through overt violence, but through isolation, deception, coercion, and financial control.

**Board Members**

Meredith DeSomma

Vikki Porter

Theo Conley

Kitty Fogarty

Bill Millios

Thelma Schroeder

HB 216 appropriately recognizes these realities by defining exploitation broadly and by addressing conduct such as isolating an individual, confiscating identification or benefit documents, exerting financial control over elderly or disabled adults, and misusing government benefits for personal gain. These protections reflect the lived experiences of many Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Marylanders whose exploitation has historically gone unaddressed under existing law.

Current fraud and abuse statutes often fail to capture situations where an individual's benefits are misappropriated through manipulation or control rather than direct theft. HB 216 fills this gap by focusing on the methods used to exploit individuals and by holding accountable those who knowingly profit from such conduct.

By establishing clear criminal penalties for benefits exploitation, this bill strengthens protections for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing individuals and other vulnerable populations and affirms their right to autonomy, dignity, and financial security.

HB 216 is a critical step toward preventing and addressing benefits exploitation in Maryland. The Maryland Association of the Deaf strongly supports this legislation and thanks the General Assembly for its commitment to protecting vulnerable residents from financial abuse and exploitation.

We look forward to a favorable outcome to HB 216.