



BILL NO: House Bill 650
TITLE: Courts - Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation
COMMITTEE: Judiciary
HEARING DATE: February 25, 2026
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

The Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence (MNADV) is the state domestic violence coalition that works to lead diverse community partners toward the common purpose of reducing the occurrence and impact of intimate partner violence. **MNADV urges the COMMITTEE to favorably Report on HB 650.**

For many years legislation has been introduced to prevent the ability of people to file SLAPP cases, silencing people exercising their constitutional rights. House Bill 650 would replace Maryland's current, weak, oft criticized statute with the Maryland Uniform Public Expression Protection Act (MUPEPA). This is a model law, passed in 15 states, designed to protect people from "Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation" - essentially meritless, expensive lawsuits used by powerful interests to silence domestic or sexual violence victims, critics, journalists, or whistleblowers. The bill creates a more robust "shield" for anyone sued for exercising their First Amendment rights (speech, petition, or assembly) regarding matters of public concern.

Elements of the bill include:

- Expedited Dismissal: It allows defendants to file a "special motion for expedited relief" to get a frivolous case thrown out early.
- Automatic Stay: Once that motion is filed, most other court proceedings (like expensive discovery/document requests) are paused until the judge rules on the motion.
- Mandatory Fees: If the defendant wins the motion, the court *must* award them attorney fees and litigation costs. This is a massive shift from "may," making it a real deterrent against filing SLAPP suits.
- Quick Timelines: The court is generally required to hold a hearing within 60 days of the motion being filed and rule within 60 days of that hearing.

Domestic violence abusers use countless forms of manipulation and abuse against their victims including the court system. Lawsuits are often intended to intimidate or silence victims who speak out about their experiences or seek justice. Such actions can deter survivors from coming

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forward or engaging in advocacy, as they may fear legal repercussions. Abusers use the court system as a way to maintain power and control over their victims, bringing their victims into court countless times or threatening them with lawsuits if they seek protective orders. Victims should not fear seeking safety such as in the form of a protective out of fear of legal retaliation from their abuser. While not all of these retaliatory suits will qualify as SLAPP suits, some will, and HB 650 will help discourage this type of litigation abuse and allow victims access to justice.

For the above stated reasons, the **Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence** urges a **favorable report on HB 650**.

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