



One Park Place | Suite 475 | Annapolis, MD 21401-3475
1-866-542-8163 | Fax: 410-837-0269
aarp.org/md | md@aarp.org | twitter: @aarpm
facebook.com/aarpm

HB 1198 – Civil Actions – Coerced Debt – Debtor Protections
House Judiciary Committee
March 11, 2026
FAVORABLE

Good afternoon, Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and members of the House Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 1198, a bill that establishes critical protections for Marylanders who have debts incurred through coercion, manipulation, and abuse. We thank Delegates Lopez, Charkoudian, Embry, and Shetty for sponsoring this legislation.

I am Sara Westrick, Advocacy Director for AARP Maryland. AARP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, nationwide organization, representing approximately 850,000 members in Maryland. We help people turn their goals and dreams into real possibilities, strengthen communities, and fight for the issues that matter most to families, such as health care, employment and income security, retirement planning, affordable utilities, and protection from financial abuse.

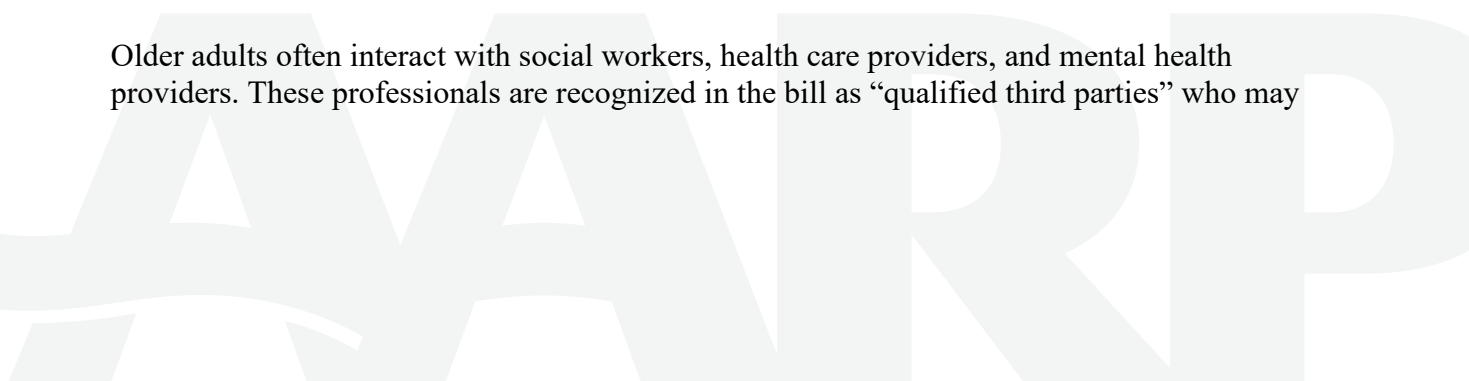
How HB 1198 Protects Maryland’s Older Adults

HB 1198 fills a gap in current law by recognizing coerced debt as a distinct and harmful form of financial abuse and by creating a process for victims to challenge and remove these illegitimate debts. Coerced debt occurs when an abuser forces or manipulates someone into taking on debt in their name. This can include opening credit cards, taking out loans, signing phone or utility contracts, or accumulating medical debt without the person’s true consent.

HB 1198 creates a structured, victim-centered process that allows survivors to notify creditors that a debt was coerced, pause collection activities while the matter is reviewed, seek relief in court, and pursue damages against the person who actually caused the debt.

Financial exploitation of older adults is one of the fastest-growing forms of abuse, and Maryland’s aging population makes this bill especially urgent. HB 1198 will significantly help elderly residents by addressing abuse by those who wish to do them harm. Many older Marylanders experience exploitation by adult children, relatives, or caretakers who misuse their personal information or pressure them into taking on debt. HB 1198 gives elders a mechanism to halt collection efforts, demonstrate that the debt was coerced, and restore their credit and financial independence.

Older adults often interact with social workers, health care providers, and mental health providers. These professionals are recognized in the bill as “qualified third parties” who may



provide the sworn documentation needed to substantiate a coerced debt claim. This makes the process more accessible for seniors who may not feel safe or able to file police reports.

If identifying the person responsible for the coerced debt would endanger the older adult, the court must take protective steps such as shielding information or holding remote hearings. This is essential for seniors who may be dependent on or living with their abuser.

Conclusion

HB 1198 offers relief for victims of coercion, exploitation, and abuse, especially older adults who are disproportionately targeted and often lack the tools to challenge fraudulent debt under current law. The bill also includes reasonable safeguards, such as creditor review of documentation, the ability to challenge claims made in bad faith, and the requirement that debtors meet a burden of proof.

By passing this bill, Maryland will join a growing number of states ensuring that survivors are not punished for debts they never chose and never benefited from.

For these reasons, AARP Maryland respectfully urges a favorable report on HB 1198.

If you have any questions, please contact Sara Westrick at swestrick@aarpp.org or by calling 410-310-0374.