



Date: February 11, 2026

To: House Judiciary Committee

Reference: House Bill 465 Civil Actions - Immunity - Disclosure of Allegations of Sexually Assaultive Behavior  
(*Stop Silencing Survivors Act*)

**Position: Favorable**

Dear Chair Bartlett and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB465, the *Stop Silencing Survivors Act*. Center for Hope and the LifeBridge Health DOVE Program work every day with survivors of violence, including survivors of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. We see firsthand the barriers individuals face when coming forward with experiences of abuse — barriers that can include fear of retaliation, fear of litigation, and the chilling effect of potential civil liability.

At Center for Hope, our mission is to provide trauma-informed care, advocacy, and support for people impacted by violence of all kinds — from child abuse, elder abuse to domestic violence and sexual assault. Our DOVE Program specifically offers comprehensive services for victims of domestic and intimate partner violence, including crisis intervention, advocacy, mental health support, and pathways toward safety and healing.

HB 465 creates a civil liability of immunity for individuals who disclose information about allegations of sexually assaultive behavior when they act in good faith. The bill also establishes a presumption of good faith unless it can be demonstrated by a preponderance of the evidence that the person acted with actual malice or intentionally or recklessly disclosed false information. The bill provides for the award of attorney fees and costs in certain circumstances to further support individuals who raise good-faith concerns.

The bill addresses a well-documented and deeply harmful practice used by perpetrators of sexual and intimate partner violence: retaliatory civil litigation intended to intimidate, silence, and further control victims. Survivors are often threatened with or subjected to defamation and related lawsuits not because the claims have merit, but because the process itself is costly, time consuming, and emotionally devastating. This practice mirrors broader patterns of coercive control and financial abuse that are common in intimate partner violence.

Consistent with the experience of Maryland's domestic violence service providers, legal assistance organizations, and health systems, survivors of intimate partner violence frequently delay or avoid disclosure due to fear of retaliation, ongoing coercive control, and legal or financial consequences.

Survivor service providers, legal practitioners, and public health professionals across the state emphasize that survivor safety depends not only on access to services, but on legal environments that support responsible disclosure and do not allow the court system to be weaponized as a tool of continued abuse.



Current national reporting data show that many sexual assaults are not reported to law enforcement, and fear of retaliation and negative consequences remains a documented barrier to disclosure. These dynamics are not limited to sexual assault and are also present in intimate partner violence, where threats of litigation can further isolate survivors and deter help seeking.

HB465 establishes a fair and balanced framework that protects good faith disclosures of sexually assaultive behavior while preserving due process. By creating a presumption of good faith, rebuttable only where there is evidence of actual malice or intentional or reckless falsehood; the bill discourages abusive litigation without preventing access to the courts for legitimate claims. The availability of attorney fees and costs in appropriate cases further deters the use of lawsuits as a tool of continued abuse.

Aligning with Trauma-Informed Practice: HB465 recognizes the complexity of survivorship and how fear of secondary harm can retraumatize those who come forward. Providing clear legal protections affirms survivors' voices and aligns with best practices in trauma-informed care.

For these reasons, the Center for Hope and the LifeBridge Health DOVE Program respectfully **urge a favorable report on House Bill 465**. We believe that this legislation will strengthen the ability of survivors and those who support them to speak out, seek assistance, and contribute to safer communities across Maryland.

Thank you.

For more information, please contact:  
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