



## COMMISSION FOR WOMEN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CLUSTER

February 11, 2026  
Delegate J. Sandy Bartlett  
Chair, Judicial Committee  
100 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: HB 465 Civil Actions-Immunity-Disclosure of Allegations of Sexually Assaultive Behavior  
(Stop Silencing Survivors Act)

Position: **SUPPORT**

Dear Chairperson Bartlett, and members of the Judicial Committee,

On behalf of the Montgomery County Commission for Women, I am writing to ask for your support of HB 465 — Civil Actions-Immunity-Disclosure of Allegations of Sexually Assaultive Behavior. Sexual violence remains pervasive within our society. In Maryland, just over 1 in every 4 adult women (26.8%) are a victim of rape within her lifetime<sup>1</sup>. Just under half of women within Maryland (47.6%) and about a third of men (30.7%) report experience other forms of sexual violence<sup>2</sup>. Despite the pervasiveness of sexual violence, sexual assault remains under-reported and under-prosecuted<sup>3</sup>. Retaliatory lawsuits have emerged as another tool by perpetrators to continue to exert control over the survivor. Individuals accused of sexual assault file defamation lawsuits against survivors who report the abuse.

Montgomery County Commission for Women advocates for legislation that promotes the equal and full participation of women and girls in every aspect of community living and access to education, healthcare, and work advancement with political and economic power. Retaliatory lawsuits against sexual assault survivors retraumatizes survivors, and place financial burdens on individuals who have already been victimized. As retaliatory lawsuits against survivors are particularly common at the undergraduate level, they, the potential to limit the survivor's educational trajectory<sup>4,5</sup>. Thus, protections are needed so those impacted sexual assault can seek out support without further fear of victimization by their abuser.

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<sup>1</sup> Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (2024, September). Sexual Assault in Maryland. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://mcasa.org/assets/files/Sexual\_Assault\_in\_MD\_Fact\_Sheet\_2024.09.pdf

<sup>2</sup> Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (2024, September). Sexual Assault in Maryland. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://mcasa.org/assets/files/Sexual\_Assault\_in\_MD\_Fact\_Sheet\_2024.09.pdf

<sup>3</sup> Maryland Legislative Agenda for Women (MLAW). (2024, November 23). MLAW fall agenda conference. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://mdlegagendaforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024-merged-proposal-packet-for-web.pdf

<sup>4</sup> Jordan, L.C. (2024, November 23). Stop silencing survivors [conference presentation]. Maryland Legislative Agenda for Women. Columbia, MD, United States. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://mdlegagendaforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024-merged-proposal-packet-for-web.pdf

<sup>5</sup> Diaz, J. (2024, November 10). This lawyer is fighting defamation lawsuits that can silence sexual assault victims. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/08/nx-s1-5111723/me-too-assault-victims-protections-defamation>

This bill comes at a critical time as individuals who confidentially report sexual assault are threatened lawsuits and maligned in the media by their accusers<sup>6,7,8</sup>. Retaliatory lawsuits may have a chilling effect on the reporting and help-seeking behaviors of survivors of sexual assault. Survivors report fear of reprisal as a barrier to reporting and accessing resources. Protections, such as the proposed legislation, that make it safer to report, without the fear of retaliation, are needed<sup>9</sup>. This legislation is aligned with current national trends, where states are introducing and passing legislation to protect survivors against retaliatory lawsuits<sup>10</sup>.

Therefore, I urge a favorable report on HB 465.

Sincerely,

Commissioner Elizabeth Richards  
Chair, Policy & Legislative Committee  
Montgomery County Commission for Women

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson, K. (2025, January 22). Sean 'Diddy' Combs files \$50 million defamation lawsuit over alleged sexual assault videos. *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/celebrities/2025/01/22/sean-diddy-combs-sues-for-defamation/77889904007/>

<sup>7</sup> Curto, J. (2025, January 23). Chris Brown files \$500M defamation suit against Warner Bros. over documentary. *Vulture*. <https://www.vulture.com/article/chris-brown-defamation-lawsuit-warner-bros.html>

<sup>8</sup> Weidner, A. (2024, December 19). Andrew Cuomo sues former aide, sexual misconduct accuser for defamation. *CBS News*. <https://cbs6albany.com/news/local/andrew-cuomo-sues-former-aide-sexual-misconduct-accuser-for-defamation-charlotte-bennett-new-york-letitia-james-attorney-general-governor>

<sup>9</sup> Zinzow, H.M., Littleton, H., Muscari, E., & Sall, K. (2021). Barriers to formal help-seeking following sexual violence: Review from within an ecological systems framework. *Victims & Offenders: An Internal Journal of Evidence-based Research, Policy, & Practice*. 17:6, 893-918. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2021.1978023>

<sup>10</sup> Diaz, J. (2024, November 10). This lawyer is fighting defamation lawsuits that can silence sexual assault victims. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/08/nx-s1-5111723/me-too-assault-victims-protections-defamation>