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To: House Judiciary Committee
From: Immigration Law Section Council
Date: February 23, 2026
Subject: **HB923 – Uniform Nondiscrimination in Treatment and Evidence “UNITE” Act**
Position: Support

**ORAL TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF Maryland HB923
Uniform Nondiscrimination in Treatment and Evidence “UNITE” Act**

Good afternoon, Honorable Chair and Members of the Committee.

My name is Juan Carlos Silen, and I am an immigration attorney and a member of the Immigration Law Section Council of the Maryland State Bar Association, and I am here on behalf of the Section to provide testimony in support of House Bill 923, the UNITE Act.

I began working with Special Immigrant Juvenile cases, including the custody proceedings related to that immigration relief, in 2019 while working at a Baltimore nonprofit. Since then, I have represented immigrant children and their guardians or parents in custody and guardianship proceedings across Maryland, gaining firsthand experience with how these cases are handled across different jurisdictions.

The issue this bill addresses is straightforward: there is currently no uniformity across Maryland equity courts, and immigrant children are often treated differently than U.S. citizen children in identical custody proceedings. Although Maryland family law is uniform statewide, in practice some counties require immigrant children to file additional evidence that citizen children are not required to file. These differences create inconsistent access to the courts.

Many of the children subject of custody or guardianship proceedings have experienced abandonment, abuse, or neglect and qualify for immigration relief specifically intended to protect children. See 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(27)(J). Because of those circumstances, these minors frequently lack access to passports or other government-issued photo identification. When courts require documentation that these children cannot realistically obtain, cases are delayed or prevented from moving forward based on procedural barriers rather than the child’s welfare. This lack of access to the Courts limits, and in some cases eliminates, a child’s ability to obtain findings related to parental abandonment and to pursue immigration protections specifically designed to safeguard vulnerable children.

This Bill provides a clear and practical solution. The bill requires equity courts to apply the same standards, procedures, and evidentiary rules used in cases involving U.S. citizen children and clarifies that identity and age may be established through reliable evidence, including birth

certificates, school or medical records, or sworn testimony, rather than requiring government-issued photo identification as the exclusive means of proof which is often unattainable.

The lack of uniformity in these proceedings exists across Maryland. This Bill represents an important first step toward addressing this issue. Practitioners throughout the State consistently encounter county-specific practices and internal procedural requirements that vary from court to court. Consistent statewide guidance promotes predictability for families, attorneys, and courts alike and helps ensure that similarly situated children receive consistent treatment regardless of venue. While the scope of this bill is focused, it underscores the broader importance of clear and uniform practices in Maryland court proceedings.

In sum, the Maryland State Bar Association supports House Bill 923, because it promotes uniform access to Maryland courts, ensures equal treatment of all children regardless of immigration status, and protects vulnerable children from procedural disparities that prevent courts from addressing their safety, stability, and long-term welfare. Equal access to justice strengthens the integrity of Maryland's family law system and ensures that courts remain focused on their central mission: protecting children.

END OF TESTIMONY