

Delegate Sandy Bartlett, Chair, Delegate Debra Davis, Vice Chair, and members of the House Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony **in support** of HB 630.

HB 630 addresses a specific and urgent problem: the growing practice of converting ordinary commercial or industrial buildings into large-scale immigration detention centers, even though those structures were never designed or constructed to safely confine hundreds or thousands of people. The proposed ICE facility at 16220 Wright Road near Williamsport, a former warehouse now owned by ICE and slated to become the “New ICE Baltimore Processing Facility”, is a textbook example of exactly what this bill is meant to prevent.

The Wright Road building was designed as a logistics warehouse, not as a correctional or detention facility. Its original purpose assumed limited water and sewer needs, minimal on-site medical capacity, and industrial rather than residential life-safety systems. Yet federal plans anticipate holding on the order of 1,500 people at a time, with sleeping areas, medical spaces, food service, and recreation or, in other words, a de facto jail built inside a shell that was never engineered for that use. This mismatch between the building’s original design and its proposed detention role raises serious concerns about fire safety, emergency evacuation, ventilation and air quality, infection control, access to adequate medical infrastructure, and the basic dignity and well-being of the people who would be held there.

Experiences elsewhere in Maryland underscore why HB 630 is needed. In Elkridge, Howard County officials and the County Council moved quickly to oppose and ultimately block the use of a privately owned office/warehouse building on Meadowridge Road as an ICE detention facility, citing both procedural defects and deep community concern about retrofitting an ordinary commercial structure into a detention site. By contrast, the Washington County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution explicitly expressing their “full support” for ICE and DHS enforcement efforts, including the Wright Road detention center, despite significant public opposition that led to protests and the clearing of their meeting room. The commissioners also declined to request consulting-party status in the federal Section 106 historic-preservation review for this project (a status that has since been granted instead to an individual resident who objected to the facility). This stark divergence i.e. Howard County saying “no” after a fully engaging process, while Washington County says “yes” and leaves Section 106 consultation to an anonymous private citizen, shows that, absent HB 630, the determination of whether or not a warehouse can be turned into an immigration detention center depends more on local politics and omissions than on sound standards of safety, process, and humane design.

HB 630 offers a clear, bright-line safeguard: if a building was not originally designed and constructed to house or detain people as a correctional or detention facility, it may not be used as an immigration detention facility in Maryland. That standard is easy to administer and difficult to evade. It prevents after-the-fact retrofits of warehouses and office parks into high-capacity detention sites and makes clear that, if immigration detention is going to occur in this state, it must happen in structures that were purpose-built to meet appropriate life-safety and habitability standards from the ground up.

This approach also protects surrounding communities. When a warehouse built for trucks and pallets is suddenly repurposed to house more than a thousand people, local systems including water, sewer, roads, emergency services, and health infrastructure are put under enormous, unplanned strain. The Wright Road project has already raised questions about how such a facility would obtain sufficient water and wastewater capacity and how emergency responders would safely evacuate a large, detained population in a fire or other disaster. HB 630 ensures that Maryland does not become a testing ground for improvised detention mega sites that were never meant to support that kind of continuous human occupancy.

Importantly, HB 630 does not attempt to rewrite federal immigration law. It does not bar the federal government from enforcing immigration statutes or from operating detention facilities per se. Instead, it sets a neutral, building-based rule that applies to any immigration detention operator in Maryland: if you want to confine people here for civil immigration purposes, you must do so in a facility that was designed and constructed as a detention or correctional facility, with the corresponding safety and design standards that implies. That is well within the State's traditional authority to regulate land use, building safety, and the conditions under which human beings may be confined within its borders.

For these reasons, with contrasting examples of the opposed Elkridge project and the Washington County Commissioners' explicit support for Wright Road and failure to seek Section 106 consulting status highlighting the need for a uniform statewide standard, I respectfully urge a **favorable report** on HB 630. Maryland should not permit any immigration detention facility to be created by retrofitting a warehouse or similar building that was never designed to safely and humanely hold people in custody.

Eileen Benecke, Frederick, Maryland

This testimony was drafted with assistance from Perplexity AI.