



**TZEDEK DC**<sup>®</sup>  
Legal Help for People in Debt

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF TZEDEK DC

Before the Ways and Means Committee

Maryland House of Representatives

Hearing on House Bill 676, An Act Establishing the Maryland Financial Empowerment Center  
Network Pilot Program

February 17, 2026

Thank you, Chair Wilkins, members, and staff of the Ways and Means Committee, for convening this hearing. Tzedek DC is an independent public interest law center headquartered at The University of the District of Columbia. Our mission is to safeguard the legal rights and financial health of DC residents with low and moderate incomes dealing with the often-devastating consequences of abusive debt collection practices and other consumer related issues. We provide free legal services, financial counseling, and importantly for this hearing, offer a free eight-week Financial Empowerment Program designed to help participants strengthen their financial skills and create achievable financial goals for themselves. We have previously been asked by coalition allies to submit testimony to policy makers in Maryland and, where we can, we are happy to do so as part of an effort to advance policy reform in the region.

We submit this testimony today in strong support of House Bill 676, An Act Establishing the Maryland Financial Empowerment Center Network Pilot Program.

Recent research underscores a persistent and urgent need to strengthen financial literacy across the United States. According to the National Foundation for Credit Counseling's 2024 Financial Literacy Survey, 47% of U.S. adults grade their personal finance knowledge as a "C" or worse, reflecting a concerning decline in financial capability and highlighting widespread gaps in understanding essential concepts like budgeting, credit, and investment risk. The FINRA Foundation's 2024 National Financial Capability Study reports that only 46% of adults have enough savings to cover three months of expenses, a decrease from 53% in 2021. With rising living costs and more complex financial products than ever, accessible and practical financial education is essential.

Tzedek DC's Financial Empowerment Program was built with this need in mind. It's an approachable, eight-week series that helps participants—especially young adults—get a better handle on how money works in everyday life. Over the course of eight weeks, participants gain the basic financial knowledge, tools, and resources on the following topics: 1) Spending Plans, S.M.A.R.T. Goals and Action Plans; 2) Understanding Your Paycheck; 3) Savings, Interest, and Financial Institutions; 4) Credit Cards and Debit Cards; 5) Investments; 6) Credit Scores and Credit Reports; 7) Scams and Know Your Rights; and 8) Financial Aid for Next Steps. Each week, participants spend two hours in interactive workshops that break down these topics. The

workshops are led by a mix of Tzedek DC staff, community partners, and financial experts, and they're available both in person and online. Best of all, the entire program is free for participants, thanks to grant funding, and every participant gets one on one financial counseling plus \$100 in investment seed money in a no fee investment account to start putting new skills into practice right away.

And it's already making a real difference. Since the program launched in November 2023, 147 people have completed it, and the early results are impressive. 98% of participants say they changed their financial habits after going through the program, half report feeling more confident about managing credit and investing, and 90% would recommend the program to people they care about. The personal stories behind those numbers are just as powerful. Graduates have said the program gave them "hope for a path to financial management and freedom," and some shared that financial goals like homeownership or starting a business now feel within reach. One participant explained that they realized financial stability "isn't inaccessible, and is for people that look like me," which really speaks to how empowering the program can be.

We're excited to share our strong support for HB 676, which would establish the Maryland Financial Empowerment Center Network Pilot Program and create a statewide network of free financial counseling and coaching services. The bill lays out a promising vision: financial empowerment centers across different regions of Maryland, each offering guidance on saving, debt reduction, accessing banking services, and building credit—all at no cost to residents. This kind of statewide infrastructure will help Maryland to help close persistent financial knowledge gaps and address the very real barriers that so many households face.

Our experience running Tzedek DC's Financial Empowerment Program has shown us just how transformative high quality, accessible financial education can be. Our program outcomes make it clear that when people are given practical tools, one on one support, and a learning environment that meets them where they are, they can take meaningful steps toward financial stability.

We also believe strongly in the bill's intention to ensure that financial empowerment services are available across all regions of Maryland. Between rural communities, suburban areas, and major population centers, Marylanders have diverse work schedules, family responsibilities, and transportation needs. We encourage the committee and Comptroller's office to offer flexible scheduling and a mix of in person and virtual options; an approach we've found essential in our own program. Additionally, we also encourage the development of clear metrics to track the program's impact over time—helping identify what's working well, where additional resources are needed, and how the program can continue to grow effectively.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. Tzedek DC is proud to see Maryland taking such an important step toward expanding financial education, and we are happy to help in any way we can. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact [sp@tzedekdc.org](mailto:sp@tzedekdc.org).

Sincerely,

Tzedek DC