



January 16, 2026

Maryland House Ways and Means Committee  
130 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

**Testimony Opposing H.B. 24: County Boards of Education - Volunteer Aides - School Chaplain  
Submitted by: Fish Stark, on behalf of the Center for Freethought Equality**

Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, Members of the Committee,

As a concerned Marylander, an educator, and in my role as the Executive Director of the Center for Freethought Equality, I urge you to reject H.B 24: Volunteer Aides School Chaplain Bill.

The Center for Freethought Equality is the advocacy and political arm of the American Humanist Association, and advocates on behalf of the 30% of Americans—and 33% of Marylanders<sup>1</sup>—who identify as humanist, atheist, agnostic, “none,” or “nothing in particular” on issues that are important to them,, including the separation of church and state and protecting civil liberties and human rights for all.

**Chaplains Belong Many Places, But Not in Public Schools**

Chaplains—when trained and licensed—serve important roles. They support the religious and spiritual needs of individuals who are deprived of or away from their religious community and leadership, perhaps because they are hospitalized, away at college, incarcerated, or on military assignment. In the spaces they belong, chaplains provide an inherently religious service: they pray with individuals, help those in their care answer the “big questions,” provide guidance and solace during life's toughest moments, and even assist people as they leave or change religion. The Center for Freethought Equality's affiliated organization, the American Humanist Association—for which I also serve as executive director—is proud to endorse Humanist chaplains and supports their work as they care for the needs of the diverse religious population they serve.

When it comes to our public schools, chaplains simply don't belong. Unlike students away from home or college, youth in Maryland's public schools are not deprived of their religious communities and have access to clergy in their day-to-day lives if their parents allow for it. Furthermore, Maryland's youngest residents should not be expected to be able to rebuff adults they do not wish to speak with on school grounds. They cannot be expected to know their rights, or to feel confident exercising them. It is the responsibility of those on the committee to protect our K-12 students from the coercion and power imbalance created by this very scenario.

Maryland families that wish to imbue their children's education with religion already have ample options, such as enrolling in private schools, and participating in after school religious programs.

And the kind of care chaplains provide—that is, inherently religious care—if allowed in public schools would immediately violate students' freedom of religion and parents' rights to direct the religious upbringing of their children.

**This Program Will Harm Students**

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center. (2025). *2023-24 U.S. Religious Landscape Study Interactive Database: People in Maryland*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/state/maryland/>.

The bill text would allow county boards to use volunteer aides in school activities “to provide support services to students.” The mere presence of clergy in what is supposed to be a neutral public education system serving students of all faiths or no faith at all would coerce students and violate their rights.

If school officials steer students toward chaplains—particularly in moments of grief, crisis, or emotional distress—students may feel they have no real choice but to comply. The inherent imbalance between adults in positions of authority and students makes genuine opt-in participation unrealistic. For students from different faith traditions or nonreligious households, these encounters can quickly become isolating, intimidating, or marginalizing, and, in cases where individuals serving as chaplains have no licensure or accreditation requirements, these encounters can lead to them being proselytized to against both their wishes and those of their parents.

While the use of chaplains through these programs by students is being pitched as voluntary, the ACLU of Texas found that that is far from reality: school districts that have chaplain programs often fail to provide clear opt-out processes or inform students that chaplains are not licensed mental-health professionals<sup>2</sup>.

The exclusionary agenda of these school chaplain programs is undeniable. The organization lobbying for these bills to pass nationwide, the National School Chaplain Association, explicitly included in their ‘School Chaplain Legislation Facts Sheet’ the following statement: “Will funding School Chaplains open Pandora’s Box flooding our school with woke clergy? No. According to U.S. Labor Statistics, 91% of Chaplains are Protestant, 7% are Catholic, and 2% are everything else.”<sup>3</sup> This is a transparent Trojan Horse designed not to provide all students equally with emotional support from caring adults, but to inappropriately use our public schools as a platform for conservative evangelical Christians to proselytize to students in their most vulnerable moments. Delegate Metzger should be ashamed to have introduced it.

Other materials the National School Chaplain Association provides bill sponsors and supporters direct them to deliberately understate the religious focus of chaplains and instead recommend advocates and legislators draw similarities to mental health professionals. For example, bill sponsors are coached to shape chaplains as ‘care providers’, and use phrases like ‘mental health’, ‘skilled responder’ and ‘certified’. They are warned not to use language like ‘religious’, ‘Christian’, ‘Prayer Pastor’, ‘ministry’<sup>4</sup>, even though chaplains are inherently religious actors.

The secular public school system is meant to be an accessible education system for all - not an indoctrination mechanism. Inserting clergy into secular classrooms undermines religious freedom and fuels division and discrimination. Leaders from all faiths and none across the country, including clergy, and specifically including the humanist chaplains endorsed by the American Humanist Association, are on record opposing the legislation that establishes these programs<sup>5</sup>. They agree that public schools must be safe, secular spaces where evidence—not religion—drives decisions, and that mental health care belongs in the hands of trained professionals that ensure every child gets ethical, informed, and appropriate support.

### **This Bill is Futile, Broad, and Irresponsible.**

Individuals can already volunteer in a public school if they pass a background check and do so through appropriate channels. Just last month, I volunteered in my local public high school doing mock interviews for students. I didn’t mention my religious beliefs because I was there to help students learn, not leverage my position of relative power to convert them to my personal religious views, which any reasonable and ethical person knows is inappropriate for an adult working or volunteering in a public school. If a member of the clergy wanted to be a public school volunteer, then they could - no one would stop them - *they just cannot show up in their role as a chaplain and perform religious ministry with students*. That prohibition protects the rights of all students.

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<sup>2</sup> American Civil Liberties Union of Texas. (2023). *Texas School Boards Must Reject School Chaplains, Civil Liberties Group warns* <https://www.aclutx.org/en/press-releases/texas-school-boards-must-reject-school-chaplains-civil-liberties-groups-warn>

<sup>3</sup> National School Chaplain Association. (2025). *School Chaplain Legislation Facts Sheet* [https://ndlegis.gov/assembly/69-2025/testimony/HEDU-1456-20250211-36857-F-DAVIS\\_JOHNNY\\_A.pdf](https://ndlegis.gov/assembly/69-2025/testimony/HEDU-1456-20250211-36857-F-DAVIS_JOHNNY_A.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> National School Chaplain Association. (2025). *School Chaplain Legislation Facts Sheet* [https://ndlegis.gov/assembly/69-2025/testimony/HEDU-1456-20250211-36857-F-DAVIS\\_JOHNNY\\_A.pdf](https://ndlegis.gov/assembly/69-2025/testimony/HEDU-1456-20250211-36857-F-DAVIS_JOHNNY_A.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Americans United for The Separation of Church and State. (2024). *Chaplains don’t belong in public schools* <https://www.au.org/the-latest/articles/chaplains-letter-schools2024/>

Under this bill, a volunteering chaplain would not be required to meet minimum training requirements, or be endorsed by an ecclesiastical organization, because those standards do not exist in the bill. Anyone could claim they are a chaplain and volunteer in that capacity through the program.

### **After Enactment, Programs Allowing Chaplains in Classrooms are Unpopular**

Even if the bill had guardrails, introducing religious authorities in public school buildings is unpopular, and school districts in states with these programs routinely decline to accept chaplains into the schools. Across the board, school districts in states where chaplain legislation has passed are not implementing these programs. For example, the 25 largest school districts in Texas voted to reject school chaplain programs,<sup>6</sup> and in total, an overwhelming 74% of districts refused to either change their current volunteer programs or accept a chaplain program.<sup>7</sup>

It took more than a year for a single Florida school district to bring on a public-school chaplain after legislation passed in the state, likely due to the constitutional and legal concerns of impeding the rights of students to their secular public education. That chaplain was Reverend Jack Martin, a ‘politically-active pastor’ who consistently posts about his support for Donald Trump, writes songs in strong support of January 6 insurrectionists, and openly promotes right-wing conspiracy theories, including ones related to health<sup>8</sup>. He also identifies as a pastor of the Black Robe Regiment, an extremist Christian Nationalist organization. Individuals like Jack Martin do not belong in support roles for our students.

### **Choose the Evidence-Based Solution**

Young people in Maryland are not immune from the national youth mental health crisis<sup>9</sup>. Maryland’s most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey details a grim reality of student struggle with mental illness, where 22% of middle schoolers and 28% of high school students reported poor mental health. The mental health crisis disproportionately affects LGBTQ, female, and non-white youth<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, the National Alliance on Mental Illness found in 2025 that each year, “105,000 Maryland adolescents experience a major depressive episode” and 63,000 young Marylanders seriously think about suicide<sup>11</sup>.

Expanding access to licensed school counselors, psychologists, and social workers is a critical mitigator against suicide, depression, and risky behavior. Students rely heavily on the support of public school mental health resources and personnel.

Thankfully, Maryland knows what works and is focused on supporting these students: the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future’s grants for the Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports has effectuated the hiring of more than 700 behavioral health workforce members<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Baptist Joint Committee. (2024). *Say ‘no’ to chaplains in public schools* <https://bjconline.org/publicschoolchaplains/>

<sup>7</sup> Austin American-Statesman. (2025). *How did Texas school districts vote on school chaplain programs? Here's the data* <https://www.statesman.com/story/news/education/2025/03/27/texas-chaplains-school-counselors-how-schools-voted-accept-reject/82633943007/>

<sup>8</sup> Florida Phoenix. (2025). *Meet the state’s first public school chaplain, a politically active pastor* <https://floridaphoenix.com/2025/10/11/meet-the-states-first-public-school-chaplain-a-politically-active-pastor/>

<sup>9</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics. (2021). *AAP-AACAP-CHA Declaration of a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/>

<sup>10</sup> Maryland Department of Health. (2025). *Overview of the Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey/Youth Tobacco Survey* <https://gocpp.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/Youth-Risk-Behavior-Survey-Overview-1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2025). *Mental Health in Maryland* <https://www.nami.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Maryland-GRPA-Data-Sheet-8.5-x-11-wide.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Maryland Department of Health. (2026). *Maryland Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports Updates* <https://health.maryland.gov/mchrc/Pages/Maryland-Consortium-on-Consolidated-Community-Supports.aspx?slrid=598e53a0-28a7-5022-088c-3b58763c2f50>

If Maryland is earnest about its commitment to addressing student mental health, it should continue to invest in these solutions. In Maryland schools, there are 310 students per school mental health counselor<sup>13</sup>, 1,053 students per psychologist<sup>14</sup>, and 2,324 students per social worker<sup>15</sup>. These ratios all fail to meet what is recommended by the American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, and School Social Work Association of America. But as gaps remain, the solution cannot be to expose our students to religious coercion in their classrooms.

Bills like H.B.24 ignore the reality of legitimate mental health intervention and present a clear danger to our students' wellbeing by disingenuously touting religious consulting as an equivalent to, and possibly a substitute for, actual mental health professionals.

### **Oppose H.B.24**

Placing chaplains in public schools undermines the promise of inclusive, evidence-based education and threatens the constitutional protections that keep our classrooms welcoming to all.

We know that our young people are hurting. They are grappling with grief, discrimination, anxiety, and trauma at levels we cannot afford to ignore. In moments of crisis, students do not need ideology or an unlicensed wannabe improvising his best youth pastor impression — they need licensed, trusted mental health professionals who are trained to respond with compassion, competence, and accountability. They need schools that are affirming spaces for every child, regardless of religion, belief, or background. They do not need bills like this one that are not serious about addressing student mental health, but are instead mendaciously and manipulatively promoted by national extremist evangelical organizations that intend to use our public schools as a place to push their narrow beliefs on children to violate students' and families' religious liberty.

I respectfully urge the committee to reject this legislation.

Warmly,



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<sup>13</sup> American School Counselor Association. (2026). *School Counselor Roles & Ratios* <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/about-school-counseling/school-counselor-roles-ratios>

<sup>14</sup> National Association of School Psychologists. (2025). *State Shortages Data Dashboard* <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/state-shortages-data-dashboard>

<sup>15</sup> School Social Work Association of America. (2026). *SSWAA National Census* <https://www.sswaa.org/national-census>