



Stop Silencing Survivors

One Sentence Synopsis: This bill creates additional protections from retaliatory litigation for sexual assault survivors.

Committees: Senate Judicial Proceedings, House Judiciary

Lead Senate Sponsor: Senator Sara Love

Lead House Sponsor: Delegate Sandy Bartlett

Lead Group: Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA)

Lead Group Contact: Lisae C Jordan, Executive Director & Counsel **Email:** lcjordan@mcasa.org

Describe the problem:

Sexual assault continues to be one of the most under-reported and under-prosecuted crimes in America. In Maryland and across the country, rapists are using retaliatory lawsuits to silence those who speak out about sexual violence. Survivors are being subjected to expensive, retraumatizing, and drawn-out litigation, and some are discouraged from ever speaking out.

Of all adult women residing in Maryland, 23.6%, or about 539,291 adult women, have experienced some form of completed or attempted rape in their lifetime. About 54.3%, or 1,240,828 of Maryland's women, and more than 30.7% of Maryland's men, about 674,025, have experienced other forms of sexual violence. (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2016/2017 Report on SA Data Brief.)

Describe your proposed solution:

This bill would provide protection from retaliatory litigation for survivors who disclose sexual assault in good faith, while preserving the right to sue for intentional or reckless disclosure of false information or malicious allegations of assault. It is fair and it is needed for survivors, the majority of whom are women. The bill would provide sexual assault survivors with the same protections that are currently given to employers providing employment references. It provides a practical and effective way to discourage sex offenders from using the courts to silence survivors.

Nearly 1 out of every 5 American women, 18 years or older, has been the victim of at least one attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. (National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2015 Data Brief.) This bill will help empower survivors who choose to disclose sexual assault and will help make our communities safer by making it more likely that sex offenders will be identified and held accountable.

Benefit to Communities of Color:

Black and Indigenous women who are victims of sex crimes receive less police protection, less interventions, fewer prosecutions of their assaulter, and less assistance. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that for every white woman that reports her rape, at least five white women do not report

theirs; and yet, for every African-American woman that reports her rape, at least fifteen African-American women do not report theirs. Reporting Crime to the Police, 1992-2000, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs (March 2003), <https://static.prisonpolicy.org/scans/bjs/rcp00.pdf>. African American females experience intimate partner violence at a rate 35% higher than that of white females, and about 2.5 times the rate of women of other races, (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). 48% of Latinas in one study reported that their partner's violence against them had increased since they immigrated to the US. (Dutton, Mary; Leslye Orloff, and Giselle Aguilar Hass. 2000, Characteristics of help-seeking behaviors, resources, and services needs of battered immigrant Latinas: Legal and Policy implications. Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law and Policy. 7(2)). This bill will help empower women of color by removing a barrier to reporting sexual assault.



Protection of Students from Sexual Exploitation in Schools

One Sentence Synopsis: This bill closes a loophole in Maryland’s sexual offense statute by prohibiting sexual conduct between a school resource officer (SRO) and any student at the school to which the officer is assigned, recognizing the inherent power imbalance and duty of care owed to students.

Committees: Senate Judicial Proceedings, House Judiciary

Lead Senate Sponsor: Senator Bill Folden

Lead House Sponsor: Delegate Karen Simpson

Lead Group: Maryland State's Attorney's Association

Lead Group Contact: Joyce King, Chief Counsel **Email:** jking1@statesattorney.us

Describe the problem:

Under current Maryland Criminal Law §3-307(a)(4)), it is a crime for certain persons in positions of authority—such as teachers, coaches, and custodians—to engage in sexual activity with students under their supervision. Likewise Maryland Criminal Law §3-314 makes it a crime for a law enforcement officer to engage in sexual contact, intercourse, or a sexual act with anyone they are investigating, assisting, or detaining, or with anyone seeking their official help (including students at their assigned school), unless the relationship existed beforehand and was entirely unrelated to the officer’s official duties.

However, school resource officers (SROs) are not included in these statutes. This omission has allowed cases in which law enforcement officers, assigned to schools to protect students, have instead used their authority, access, and trust to pursue sexual relationships with minors. The lack of statutory clarity makes it difficult to prosecute or discipline these abuses of power and sends a damaging message that some authority figures in schools are exempt from the same accountability as others.

Describe your proposed solution:

The proposed amendment simply adds school resource officers to the list of positions covered under § 3-314, ensuring that SROs are legally prohibited from engaging in sexual acts with students at their assigned schools. This closes an existing gap, strengthens protections for minors, and reinforces the expectation that all adults in authority within schools are bound by the same ethical and legal standards.

Benefit to Communities of Color:

Communities of color are often disproportionately impacted by school-based policing and by power imbalances in educational environments. Strengthening the law to include school resource officers will help promote accountability, equity and safety for all students, especially those in historically over-policed or under-resourced schools. Research shows that women of color experience sexual violence at

substantially higher rates: for example, approximately 22 % of Black women report experiencing rape during their lifetime and about 41 % report other forms of sexual violence. This amendment therefore helps address a known disparity by ensuring that adults with authority over students cannot exploit that role without legal consequence, thereby building greater trust between students, families, and school systems in communities of color.



Family and Law Enforcement Protection Act

One Sentence Synopsis: The Family and Law Enforcement Protection Act closes gaps in Maryland’s protective order system by requiring earlier relinquishment and, when necessary, removal, of firearms from respondents to domestic violence protective orders.

Committees: Senate Judicial Proceedings, House Judiciary

Lead Senate Sponsor: Senator Hettleman

Lead House Sponsor: Delegate Bartlett

Lead Group: Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence

Lead Group Contact: Karen Herren/Executive Director **Email:** karen@mdpgv.org

Describe the problem:

In the United States, 4.5 million women report being threatened with gun violence by an intimate partner, and nearly one million have been shot by an abusive partner. The presence of a gun in a domestic violence incident increases the risk that a woman will be killed by five times. FBI data reveals that over 600 women are shot and killed by intimate partners each year—one every 14 hours. In Maryland, inadequate enforcement of firearm removal from prohibited individuals poses serious safety risks. Despite laws mandating disarmament for individuals with protective orders, pretrial conditions, or certain criminal convictions, enforcement gaps leave many survivors vulnerable. When someone becomes legally prohibited from possessing firearms—whether due to a criminal conviction or a domestic violence protective order—they must comply with the law and surrender their firearms. This is especially urgent in domestic violence cases, where a respondent not in custody may pose a significant threat of using a firearm to harm or kill a family member or intimate partner. While the Giffords Law Center rates Maryland’s gun safety laws highly, with an A-, the lack of comprehensive firearm relinquishment laws remains a critical gap in this framework. Strengthening these laws and enforcing them effectively are essential to safeguarding victims of intimate partner violence.

Describe your proposed solution:

This proposed legislation aims to strengthen firearm transfer requirements within civil court proceedings for protective orders, with specific provisions that benefit survivors of domestic violence, particularly women, who are disproportionately impacted.

1. Immediate and Consistent Firearm Surrender/Relinquishment in Protective Order Cases:
Temporary Stage: Mandate firearm removal at the temporary order stage, building on current policy, which requires mandatory removal at the final stage, to establish a layered safety net.

Timeline: Require immediate firearm transfer when an individual is legally prohibited from possession, with clearer follow up protocols.

Structure the process to build the record: Require the DVPO process to build out the record on the presence or absence of firearms so that law enforcement has probable cause to proceed to a search warrant when appropriate.

This approach closes dangerous gaps in the system, helping protect women from potentially lethal situations during the most volatile times in a domestic violence case. Immediate firearm transfer requirements significantly reduce the risk that an abuser will use a firearm to harm, threaten, or kill.

Benefit to Communities of Color:

This proposed legislation will significantly benefit communities of color, where rates of domestic violence are disproportionately high. Women of color experience violence at elevated rates, with Black women in Maryland dying from domestic violence-related firearm incidents at five times their proportion within the state population. By ensuring the swift and mandatory removal of firearms when protective orders are issued, this legislation reduces the likelihood of lethal violence, addressing a critical risk for Black women and other women of color who are often most vulnerable in these scenarios.

Statistics from the CDC highlight the higher lifetime prevalence of interpersonal violence among Black, Indigenous, and multi-racial women, and rates are similarly high within the LGBTQ+ community. Communities of color, especially those affected by socioeconomic barriers like limited access to education, employment, and safe housing, face compounding risks that increase vulnerability. For example, Black women in urban, lower-income settings, or those relying on income assistance, are particularly at risk.

By closing enforcement gaps in firearm relinquishment laws, this legislation provides additional protections in these high-risk scenarios, helping to prevent firearms from being used in acts of domestic violence.



Coerced Debt Bill

One Sentence Synopsis: This bill would allow victims of coerced debt at the hands of their abuser to be freed from the debt while allowing the creditor to go after the abusive person who actually caused the debt to be incurred.

Committees: Senate Judicial Proceedings, House Economic Matters

Lead Senate Sponsor: Senator Carl Jackson

Lead House Sponsor: Delegate Lorig Charkoudian

Lead Group: Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence (MNADV) and Economic Action Maryland Fund

Lead Group Contact: Laure Ruth, Public Policy Director, MNADV **Email:** lruth@mnadv.org

Describe the problem:

The coerced debt bill would assist women by providing legal and financial protections against economic abuse, such as relieving them of the obligation to repay them. These laws empower survivors of abuse to sever financial ties to their abuser by offering a legal framework to prove the debt was incurred fraudulently, which helps them begin to regain financial stability and freedom.

Describe your proposed solution:

The bill would provide a framework to prove that debt was incurred as part of a power and control based domestic violence relationship. It would also provide a remedy to creditors who would be able to pursue the abusive person who is actually responsible for the debt.

Benefit to Communities of Color:

A study found that 80% of survivors of color in abusive relationships had coerced debt, compared to 63% of white survivors.

Larger debt burden: The same study revealed that survivors of color had significantly higher average amounts of coerced debt, with many owing more than \$24,000.

Double the average debt: Other research notes that women of color who experience financial abuse face nearly double the average debt burden.

Lower socioeconomic status, which disproportionately affects women of color, can limit access to the resources needed to leave an abusive relationship, such as financial independence, housing, and

healthcare. Immigrant women may face language barriers and restrictions on public funds, creating further dependency on their partners. Achieving economic freedom and relief from debt will assist women of color to be safer and free from their abuser.



Timing of Hearings between TPO and FPO, and Relief for Financial Loss

One Sentence Synopsis: This bill would put Maryland in line with the majority of states which have longer than our current 7 days between temporary protection order hearings and final protection order hearings, as well as add repayment for financial loss to the relief that can be ordered in a protection order.

Committees: Senate Judicial Proceedings, House Judiciary

Lead Senate Sponsor: Senator Sara Love

Lead House Sponsor: Delegate Karen Simpson

Lead Group: Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence (MNADV)

Lead Group Contact: Laure Ruth, Public Policy Director, MNADV **Email:** lruth@mnadv.org

Describe the problem:

Key obstacles to a short timeline between a temporary protective order (TPO) hearing and a final protective order (FPO) hearing include the requirement to serve the respondent, court delays, and the time needed for all parties to prepare. In Maryland, a temporary order typically lasts for seven days after the respondent has been served, which is a tight window for all procedural requirements to be met. 48 states have a longer time line than Maryland. Survivors are often managing many things in the immediate aftermath of assault or other form of domestic violence that can qualify them for an Order of Protection - immediate physical or mental health issue, help for traumatized children, relocation for safety reasons, seeking advocacy and other assistance. This was the most requested legislative effort asked for of lawyers and other advocates at a MD conference in spring of 2025.

The other often mentioned request was to provide that judge can order repayment for financial loss, such as replacing a cell phone, paying for health services, fixing a broken door, etc. Judges often think they are not allowed to order any relief other than what is in the statute, and our effort to add "any other form of relief" other than relief that a judge determines to be necessary to protect the petitioner's safety," which is limiting language, and may not cover some of the expenses incurred due to the violence.

Describe your proposed solution:

Each year, approximately 500,000 women are physically assaulted or raped by an intimate partner compared to 100,000 men. Three out of 10 women at some point are stalked, physically assaulted, or raped by an intimate partner, compared to 1 out of every 10 men. This bill would lengthen the time between the temporary protection order hearing and the final protection order hearing from 7 days to 14 days, allowing the petitioner to address immediate health, housing or other needs, as well as other issues for the final hearing, e.g., gathering evidence such as police reports, medical records, photographs, and text messages. It may also include securing legal counsel in time for the lawyer to

prepare for the hearing, and time to arrange for witnesses to be able to appear. It will also give law enforcement more time to serve the respondent, which is one of the most frequent reasons to have to reschedule the final hearing.

Adding the ability for the courts to order repayment for financial loss caused by the respondent will assist survivors to achieve economic independence from their abuser.

Benefit to Communities of Color:

Statistics show that domestic violence (DV) disproportionately affects Black women at a higher rate than white women. Over 40% of Black women experience intimate partner physical violence, sexual violence, or stalking in their lifetime, compared to 30.2% of white women. Financial barriers, unemployment, and a lack of opportunities are also cited as systemic issues that contribute to higher rates of domestic violence in the Black community.



Protection of Identity of Victim of Sexual Assault

One Sentence Synopsis: Protects identifying information of a victim of sexual assault from appearing in public court documents.

Committees: Senate Judicial Proceedings, House Judiciary

Lead Senate Sponsor: Senator Sara Love

Lead House Sponsor: Delegate Michele Guyton

Lead Group: Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA)

Lead Group Contact: Lisae Jordan, Executive Director **Email:** lisae.jordan@gmail.com

Describe the problem:

In 2024 the Maryland General Assembly passed SB 111 to protect the identities of Minor Victims. However, this showed there is still a gap in privacy protections for adults, particularly those who are victims of sexual assault. Survivor's names can easily be accessed and found in public court documents. Victims should not have their names printed with the details of their assault on public documents. This lack of respect for a person's privacy can be a barrier to somebody even reporting these types of crimes because now their personal trauma is going to be out there for anybody to see or exploit.

Describe your proposed solution:

This bill will require the Judiciary redact and shield victims names and their identifying information in court documents automatically, without a special request or any extra red tape that puts an extra burden on the victim. This will preserve the dignity of the survivor and remove a reason why people do not come forward and report these types of crimes.

Benefit to Communities of Color:

Statistics show that 80% of sexual assaults are reported by white women, but women of color are more likely to be assaults. Various statistics show that for every black woman who reports her assault, at least 15 do not. Having a survivor's privacy protected can help remove a barrier to these crimes being reported.



Comprehensive Rehabilitative Prerelease Services-Female Incarcerated Individuals (The Monica Cooper Prerelease Act)

One Sentence Synopsis: This bill will require specific procurement processes for the construction of a prerelease facility for women including comprehensive rehabilitative services.

Committees: Senate Judicial Proceedings

Lead Senate Sponsor: Mary Washington

Lead House Sponsor: Charlotte Crutchfield

Lead Group: Women's Prerelease Equity Coalition

Lead Group Contact: Monica Cooper, Executive Director Maryland Justice Project **Email:** monica@marylandjusticeproject.org

Describe the problem:

There is no women's prerelease center that provides comprehensive rehabilitative prerelease services for female incarcerated individuals.

Describe your proposed solution:

This legislation will implement requirements for the construction of a prerelease center for women that will provide comprehensive prerelease services for female incarcerated individuals.

Benefit to Communities of Color:

Yes, a majority of the incarcerated women's population consists of women of color.



Prescription Privacy Protection Act for Abortion Medication

One Sentence Synopsis: This bill protects abortion providers from out-of-state criminal, civil, and administrative penalties (e.g. Texas) by shielding their identities, as pharmacies would be allowed to withhold a provider's name and identifying information from the prescription label of abortion medication.

Committees: Senate Finance, House Health and Government Operations

Lead Senate Sponsor: TBD

Lead House Sponsor: Chair Joseline Pena-Melnyk

Lead Group: Women's Law Center of Maryland

Lead Group Contact: Robyn Elliott, Public Policy Consultant and Lobbyist **Email:** relliott@policypartners.net

Describe the problem:

The bill protects abortion access for Marylanders and out-of-state patients by shielding the identity of abortion providers who are vulnerable to legal and physical threats.

Describe your proposed solution:

The bill will support access to abortion care by protecting abortion providers from legal and physical threats by shielding their identities on prescription labels.

Benefit to Communities of Color:

Restrictions on abortion care disproportionately impact BIPOC communities. Protecting the safety of providers and patients is critical in ensuring access to abortion services for communities that have been marginalized from the healthcare system.



ICE Enforcement Activities (title TBD)

One Sentence Synopsis: The bill will seek to sunset and prohibit 287(g) agreements in the state; these agreements allow for local law enforcement to be deputized by ICE to carry out immigration enforcement activities.

Committees: To Be Determined

Lead Senate Sponsor: TBD

Lead House Sponsor: Del. Nicole Williams

Lead Group: CASA

Lead Group Contact: Ninfa Amador, MD Policy Manager for CASA **Email:** namador@wearecasa.org

Describe the problem:

This legislation aims to sunset and prohibit 287(g) agreements in the State of Maryland, which are agreements between local law enforcement agencies and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that enhance collaboration in immigration enforcement activities. The recent ramping up of ICE activities in Maryland and across the country has demonstrated how this impacts women by separating families and causing stress and trauma. This legislation serves as just one counter to the expansion of ICE activities in our state.

Describe your proposed solution:

Limiting the expansion of ICE activities in Maryland by prohibiting 287(g) collaboration with local law enforcement will serve as a counter to the federal government's deportation initiative. It will also serve to limit the further separation of families we are seeing as a result of these mass deportations.

Benefit to Communities of Color:

Countering the expansion of ICE activities in the state will stand to benefit communities of color who are being disproportionately targeted and impacted by deportation efforts.



The Maryland Reproductive Justice and Pregnancy Outcome Protection Act

One Sentence Synopsis: The Maryland Reproductive Justice and Pregnancy Outcome Protection Act would prevent the criminalization of people for pregnancy outcomes, including miscarriage, stillbirth, or self-managed abortion, and protect equitable, autonomous reproductive care and gives effect to Maryland’s newly ratified constitutional amendment recognizing reproductive freedom as a fundamental right essential to liberty and equality.

Committees: Senate Judicial Proceedings, House Judiciary

Lead Senate Sponsor: TBD

Lead House Sponsor: Lopez

Lead Group: Pregnancy Justice; Reproductive Justice Maryland

Lead Group Contact: Ashley C. Sawyer, Senior Policy Counsel, Pregnancy Justice; Jennifer Mercer, Legislative Director, Reproductive Justice Maryland **Email:** ashley.s@pregnancyjusticeus.org; jennifer@reproductivejusticemaryland.org

Describe the problem:

Across the U.S., people experiencing pregnancy loss, stillbirth, or self-managed abortion are increasingly being criminally investigated or prosecuted—disproportionately harming Black, Brown, and Indigenous women and birthing people, who already face higher maternal mortality rates (Pregnancy Justice, 2023). A Maryland case, *State v. Moira Akers*, highlights the urgent need for reform: after reporting a stillbirth in 2018, Ms. Akers was charged with second-degree murder and child abuse based on her internet searches, lack of prenatal care, and the use of the discredited “lung float” test—a scientifically unreliable method claiming to prove live birth (Maryland Court of Appeals, 2025).

The lung float test has been widely debunked, as factors like decomposition or resuscitation can cause lungs to float even in stillbirths, leading to false findings and wrongful prosecutions (ProPublica, 2023). Such flawed forensics, compounded by racial bias and unequal healthcare access, have led to the disproportionate criminalization of pregnancy outcomes for women of color.

This punitive climate deters people from seeking care after pregnancy loss and worsens racial disparities in maternal health. It also undermines Maryland’s constitutional protection of reproductive freedom, which affirms every person’s right to make and carry out decisions to prevent, continue, or end a pregnancy.

Describe your proposed solution:

The Maryland Reproductive Justice and Pregnancy Outcome Protection Act would codify the following key provisions:

- Prohibit criminal or civil penalties based solely on pregnancy outcomes. This section directly enforces the constitutional guarantee that the State “may not, directly or indirectly, deny, burden, or abridge the right [to reproductive freedom] unless justified by a compelling State interest achieved by the least restrictive means”;
- Institute forensic and investigative safeguards including banning unreliable forensic practices such as the “lung float test” and prohibiting miscarriage, stillbirth, or self-managed abortion from serving as probable cause for searches, arrests, or surveillance;
- Protect the privacy of pregnant people by restricting the use of personal digital data; and
- Safeguard providers who deliver compassionate, evidence-based reproductive care.

These provisions ensure that Maryland’s legal system upholds evidence-based medical standards and does not substitute punitive enforcement for compassionate, patient-centered care. In addition, it brings state policy into full alignment with the Maryland Constitution’s guarantee of reproductive freedom as a fundamental right

Benefit to Communities of Color:

This legislation is essential to advancing racial and reproductive justice in Maryland. Black and Indigenous women experience maternal mortality rates two to three times higher than white women, often due to barriers in access, bias in care, and systemic inequities (Maryland Department of Health, “Maryland Vital Statistics Report, 2023). Criminalizing pregnancy outcomes only deepens these inequities by deterring care, increasing surveillance, and inflicting trauma.

By eliminating the threat of prosecution for pregnancy outcomes and prohibiting the use of discredited forensic practices, this Act:

- Promotes trust in healthcare systems, encouraging individuals to seek timely care.
- Protects privacy and autonomy in reproductive decision-making.
- Reduces racial disparities in maternal health and criminal justice outcomes.
- Reinforces Maryland’s leadership in advancing equitable, rights-based reproductive health care.
- Advances the constitutional promise of reproductive freedom as a core component of equality and liberty for all Marylanders.