



BRIAN E. FROSH, MARYLAND ATTORNEY GENERAL

PRESS RELEASE

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Media Contacts:
press@oag.state.md.us
410-576-7009

Attorney General Frosh Applauds Passage of Access to Justice Task Force Legislative Recommendations *Legislation Provides New Funding for Legal Aid, Advances Racial Equity*

BALTIMORE, MD (April 13, 2021) – Maryland Attorney General Brian E. Frosh today praised the General Assembly for passage of legislation that will directly impact low income, minority Maryland residents who have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the General Assembly passed a series of bills to reform Maryland’s criminal justice system, provide additional funding to Maryland’s historically black colleges and universities, and strengthen worker protections during a health emergency.

“After a pandemic year that wreaked havoc on millions of Marylanders, the General Assembly enacted a series of measures that will bring relief to families who have faced the threat of losing their homes, their jobs and their health,” said Attorney General Frosh. “The Access to Justice Task Force developed recommendations – with a clear-eyed view of the racial inequities that deepened the challenges faced by our most vulnerable neighbors - to ensure access to critical social services and the civil legal system. Today, we applaud the members of the General Assembly who worked with members of the Task Force and advocacy organizations to keep Marylanders housed, fed, safe, healthy, and connected to civil justice.”

The following are recommendations of the Attorney General’s Covid-19 Access to Justice Task Force that were adopted by the General Assembly:

Civil Legal Aid

The COVID-19 pandemic put an immeasurable burden on the civil legal aid system. At the same time, funding for legal services declined sharply. To put civil legal aid on a more sustainable path and to direct resources to those most in need, the General Assembly passed legislation that will provide \$6 million in new funding annually to Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) – a provider of funds to organizations that provide civil legal services to low-income Marylanders.

Improvement of Health Outcomes

The General Assembly passed several bills to improve health outcomes and reduce health inequities in Maryland that will, among other things:

- Establish a State Commission on Health Equity to advise the Maryland Department of Health on issues of racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic health disparities, and make recommendations on advancing health equity;
- Target State resources to areas of the State that experience measurable and documented health disparities and poor outcomes;
- Enhance the collection and publication of health data by race and ethnicity; and,
- Require applicants for health occupations licenses and certificates to participate in implicit bias training programs before renewal.

Housing

The pandemic highlighted a crisis in affordable housing, particularly for low-income tenants of rental properties. While there was a measure of legislative success, substantially more work needs to be done to provide assistance and resources to low-income individuals and families. The General Assembly passed legislation that will require landlords to provide 10-day written notice before filing an eviction complaint. The notice must contain a detailed list of outstanding debts and provide tenants with the opportunity to apply for financial assistance or negotiate a payment plan. Additionally, hundreds of millions dollars from federal and State funding sources was added to the budget to provide rental assistance to poor families struggling to keep their homes.

Worker Protection

New legislation will provide essential workers with benefits and protections during a catastrophic health emergency, and will require employers to maintain safe working conditions and provide necessary safety equipment at no cost to the employee.

In addition to bills recommended by the Attorney General's Access to Justice Task Force, the General Assembly also passed the following legislation:

Police Accountability

The General Assembly advanced meaningful police reform by codifying and strengthening use of force standards, increasing transparency and accountability for misconduct, heightening requirements for no-knock warrants, and ensuring that all police agencies are equipped with body-worn cameras that they are required to use. The Office of Attorney General was charged with investigating incidents of police-involved fatalities, and to prepare a report to the State's Attorney of the jurisdiction in which the incident occurred.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Finally, the General Assembly passed HB1 – legislation supported by the Office of Attorney General – that will provide \$577 million to Maryland's historically black colleges and universities. The funds will be used for a variety of purposes, including scholarships and financial aid support services; faculty recruitment and development; expansion and improvement of existing academic programs, and the development of new academic programs.

<https://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/press/2021/041321.pdf>