



Joanne C.
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Maryland State Senate, District 24

“If we don't educate our children, we won't have to worry about our future, because there won't be one!”



2021 END OF SESSION LETTER

Dear Faithful Constituent and Friends:

On Monday, April 12th at midnight, the Maryland General Assembly concluded its 442nd Legislative Session. It was very historic and highly unusual. The COVID-19 pandemic altered the way we did business. We had to wash our hands consistently, wear our masks, and practice safe distancing. All committee assignments and special meetings had to be conducted virtually. We Zoomed morning, noon and night. However, all voting matters required us to convene. We were very sensitive to public input which meant all meetings and voting sessions were streamed. What was missing were the lobbyists who frequented our offices and hallways. We successfully passed many pieces of legislation which will positively impact our county and the state of Maryland. I want to call to your attention several important initiatives which were accomplished.

INVESTING IN EDUCATION

Historical Funding for HBCUs (HB0001/SB0001)



On Wednesday March 24, 2021 at 2:45 pm Maryland Governor Larry Hogan along with Senate President Bill Ferguson and House Speaker Adrienne Jones completed the official signing of the legislation that would end the 15-year Maryland HBCU lawsuit. The bill establishes a special fund and dedicates \$577 million over the next 10 years to Maryland's four historically black colleges and universities. This funding will assist in implementing and eliminating the duplication of programs and help schools in creating new academic programs, expanding scholarships, recruiting new faculty members, and developing marketing strategies to attract students.

Blueprint for Maryland's Future - Kirwan 2.0 (HB1372)

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future Kirwan 2.0 is a bill to alter certain policies and funding in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. The General Assembly voted in favor of the bill that will require the State Department of Education to provide a report of information technology during the academic school year 2022-2023. The Department of Education will assess schools that have shown students with learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This bill will fund intensive tutoring and summer school to improve educational outcomes, add money to the State's base education formula for educational technology, support students' socio-emotional health, and ensure the responsible use of federal funds. The bill also provides additional funding through the foundation program for specified educational technology costs and adjusts funding for the Concentration of Poverty grant program.



POLICE REFORM

Maryland Police Accountability Act of 2021 (HB0670)



The Maryland General Assembly passed a sweeping package of police reform bills that has been heralded as the most comprehensive police reform in the State in generations. The package includes four Senate bills covering use of force, body-worn cameras, public inspection of officer misconduct records, independent investigations, and local control of the Baltimore Police Department, and an omnibus House bill repealing the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights.

Senate Bill 786

Returning local control of the Baltimore Police Department

Senate Bill 600

Establishing the Task Force on Independent Investigations Involving Deaths Caused by Law Enforcement Officers

Senate Bill 178

Expanding the Maryland Public Information Act to allow certain officer misconduct records to be available for public inspection; and

Senate Bill 71

Implementing a statewide use of force policy and requiring police departments to use body-worn cameras by 2025.

EQUITY AND INCLUSION



Last year, the Senate President’s Advisory Workgroup on Equity and Inclusion was formed to make recommendations in the areas of environmental justice, health disparities, and economic opportunities and wealth-building. The Workgroup developed a strong final report detailing its recommendations, many of which were developed into legislation that was passed this Session, including:

Senate Bill 674

Reforming the Commission on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities to be more representative of the diversity of our State

Senate Bill 172

Addressing health disparities by providing additional resources to neighborhoods with a history of documented health outcomes below surrounding areas

Senate Bill 777 and Senate Bill 923

Expanding funding for mothers to receive prenatal care and postpartum services

Senate Bill 933

Evaluating and addressing banking deserts

Senate Bill 689 and Senate Bill 909

Increasing opportunities and support for Maryland’s Minority Business Enterprises

COVID-19 VACCINE UPDATE

Let’s stop the COVID-19 spread together! As we adjust to a “new” normal that this pandemic forced on us – social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands, and getting vaccinated - please understand my staff and I are continuing to do everything we can to improve the quality of life for all, despite COVID-19. We have had the vaccination and I encourage you to follow my lead to protect yourself, family, friends, and community!

It is extremely important for all of us to do our part to stop the COVID spread. As the number of victims claimed by the pandemic in Prince George’s County (PGC) is declining, let’s keep it going down even further. With more vaccination clinics and three new mobile vaccination units now available in PGC, please don’t hesitate. Make an appointment and get vaccinated!



[COVID-19 Vaccine Registration Link](#)

Balanced Budget

Balanced Budget for Fiscal Year 2022 that Invests in Maryland Values



The uncertainty about Maryland's budget over the last year created a concerning dynamic as we entered Session in January. In July, the Board of Public Works cut \$413 million from the State budget as Maryland faced potential layoffs and cuts to vital services. The most recent revenue and budget projections are more optimistic than we could have expected, though financial impacts have been disparately felt. Ultimately, the MGA passed a \$52.4 billion budget that invests heavily in Maryland values, including:

- \$572M to expand testing, contact tracing, and vaccinations;
- \$13.5B in Medicaid funding to provide health care coverage to 1.5 million residents;
- \$1.6B to ensure solvency of the Transportation and Unemployment Insurance Trust Funds;
- \$600M to reopen schools safely, including \$80 million for HVAC and ventilation improvements;
- \$371.5M for Maryland's community colleges, representing a 9% increase over FY21;
- \$85M for local parks and playgrounds throughout the State; and
- \$2.1B in cash reserves, including \$1.4B in the Rainy Day Fund and \$696M in the General Fund, that erases projected budget shortfalls in FY23 and FY24.

\$3.9 Billion Supplemental Budget to Support Maryland

Thanks to Senators Chris Van Hollen and Ben Cardin and also Congressmen Anthony Brown and Steny Hoyer our federal representatives, there was a major \$3.9 billion supplement budget passed, investing federal stimulus funding to support Maryland's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The funding will support a wide range of areas, including \$800 million to the RELIEF Act programs, \$140 million to Temporary Cash Assistance, \$600 million to reopening schools, and \$250 million to provide financial assistance to businesses. In his remarks, President Ferguson highlighted the over \$300 million to expand access to broadband statewide. "Your livelihood, opportunities for learning, and safely being able to socialize should never have been about luck, or zip code," Ferguson said. "For far too many Marylanders, this transition has not been easy and has not been possible...because the technical infrastructure, knowledge and access was simply not available."

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Access to reliable broadband and devices that connect to the internet has been a fundamental problem for Maryland families and small businesses throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This lack of reliable and affordable internet access has led to some of the disparities we have seen in educational outcomes and businesses' ability to adapt. To urgently address this digital divide, Maryland is using \$300 million in federal funds to connect 567,000 people to the internet through infrastructure investments to expand broadband, a monthly subsidy to pay for internet service, and funding for free devices to connect to the internet (HB588). Further, we established an Office of Statewide Broadband within the Department of Housing and Community Development to create and implement a



statewide plan for broadband expansion, especially in rural areas (SB66).

UNEMPLOYMENT



Over the last year, every legislative office has been inundated by Marylanders unable to access rightful Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits. Although the COVID-19 pandemic is a once-in-a-100-year crisis, government must be a mechanism to support people facing hardship. In addition to providing \$1,000 checks to thousands of Marylanders unfairly caught in UI purgatory (SB496), we also passed a comprehensive set of reforms (SB771, SB816, SB817, SB818, SB819, and SB893) to fix our broken system. These bills will allow Marylanders to more easily access the money they deserve, improve their customer service experience from start to finish, and ensure the Department of Labor is prepared for the next emergency. We also passed legislation to help businesses defray the costs of small businesses paying into the Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund to provide additional aid as they recover from COVID-19 (SB811).

CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Creating a More Equitable Criminal Justice System



Reforms to our criminal justice system are desperately needed so that it serves all Marylanders fairly and justly. The MGA continues to make significant strides towards a more equitable and effective system, including overriding vetoes of 2020 legislation to create parity in prerelease services (SB684), remove minor marijuana charges from Maryland's case search (HB83), and expand expungement for low level offenses to increase employment opportunities (HB1336). Building off that success, this Session we passed legislation to consistently compensate wrongly-convicted and incarcerated Marylanders (SB14), remove the Governor and politics from Maryland's parole process (SB202), strengthen and clarify the role of the *Workgroup to Study Partial Expungement* (SB874), and through the *Juvenile Restoration Act*, end sentences of life without the possibility of parole for minors except under certain circumstances (SB494).

SPORTS BETTING

HB 940 Gaming - Regulation of Fantasy Gaming Competitions and Implementation of Sports Wagering - Supplementary Appropriation

This bill establishes and implements sports wagering in the State and provides for regulation of sports wagering and fantasy gaming competitions. The State Lottery and



Gaming Control Commission (SLGCC) must generally regulate sports wagering and the conduct of sports wagering to the same extent that it regulates the operation of video lottery terminals (VLTs) and table games in the State. Certain revenues are distributed to the Blueprint for Maryland's Future Fund (BMFF) and the Problem Gambling Fund. Several provisions address the ability of minorities, women, and minority and women-

owned businesses to participate in the sports wagering industry.

SENATOR BENSON'S BILLS

SB 845 Education – Workforce Development Sequence Scholarships – Eligibility

This bill expands eligibility for the Workforce Development Sequence Scholarship to include a Maryland resident or graduate of a Maryland high school who is enrolled directly in a registered apprenticeship program that partners with a public community college in the State.

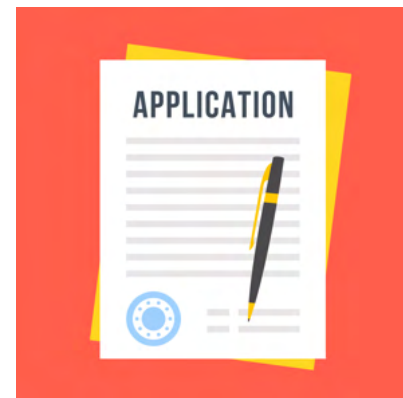


SB 846 Home Energy Assistance - Critical Medical Needs Program - Power to the People Pilot Program

This bill requires the Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP), in coordination with the United Way of Central Maryland and the Fuel Fund of Maryland, to establish the Power to the People Pilot Program by July 1, 2022. The pilot program will expand access to the Critical Medical Needs (CMN) Program and provide training for 2-1-1 Maryland United Way Helpline intake specialists and case managers to serve as navigators.

SB 907 Human Services - Critical Medical Needs Program - Application for Assistance

This bill requires the Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP) to allow a critical medically vulnerable individual, who is at least 60 years old and assisted by a navigator, to provide certification from a medical provider of a severe health condition within 90 days after applying for the Critical Medical Needs Program (CMNP).



SB 933 Financial Regulation - Access to Banking and Financial Services - Reporting

This bill requires the Office of the Commissioner of Financial Regulation (OCFR) to submit a report to the General Assembly, by December 31, 2021, analyzing the banking environment in Maryland. The report must (1) include the number and types of State and federal banks and other financial institutions by jurisdiction; (2) identify banking deserts in the State where citizens have limited access to financial services or are living in areas without a credit union or bank branch; and (3) recommend strategies to ensure residents of underserved jurisdictions have access to financial services.

FINAL THOUGHTS



SENATE OF MARYLAND

I want to thank you for your unwavering support as we continue to “raise the bar” for our place and space. The adjustments which we have made over the last thirteen months have been very sobering. The many things we have taken for granted have come to a standstill. We, however, have been steadfast in accepting what we cannot change. Taking care of our health has been a top priority. It is my hope and prayer that some sense of normalcy will occur soon. I miss the hugs and enjoyment of face to face conversations, getting together for church service, visiting our friends, eating together and enjoying great activities. We will endure and life will go on as we continue to have hope and keep on looking up!

Please continue to reach out to my office during this time if you have any questions, comments or concerns. I can be reached at (301) 858-3148 or at joanne.benson@senate.state.md.us. I look forward to hearing from you and continuing to serve and represent the needs of the citizens of Prince George's County.

Respectfully,

Senator Joanne C. Benson
24th Legislative District

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