



PRESS RELEASE

Attorney General Frosh Announces Launch of the COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force

Task Force Will Develop Strategies and Solutions Addressing the Significant Challenges for Marylanders in the Wake of COVID-19

BALTIMORE, MD (June 11, 2020) – Maryland Attorney General Brian E. Frosh, in partnership with the Maryland Access to Justice Commission, today announced the launch of the Attorney General’s COVID-19 Access to Justice Task. For many Marylanders, particularly those in low income and communities of color, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated challenges in obtaining access to justice on a scale and magnitude not encountered before. The economic upheaval caused by business closures and illness has created significant hardships that only the civil justice system can resolve, like missed rent payments leading to eviction notices; disputes over medical or consumer debt; or people wrongfully denied public benefits necessary to keep families afloat. Many people will be left to navigate on their own the complicated post-COVID civil justice landscape. Yet, unlike in criminal cases, people dealing with the civil justice system do not have a right to an attorney if they cannot afford one.

The Task Force brings together high-level and diverse leaders with expertise in a myriad of sectors including health, disaster recovery, business, government, housing, and many others to confront these new challenges. The goal of the Task Force is to ensure that when Marylanders encounter the civil legal system, justice is accessible, fair and equitable. Equitable access to the civil justice system will protect public health, spur economic recovery and growth, and reduce further harms to the most vulnerable. The Task Force will focus its efforts on the key short-term and long-term civil legal issues created or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including housing, consumer fraud and debt, and public benefits. It will also address the looming deficit in civil legal aid funding and the disparities in outcomes among communities of color. The Task Force will develop strategies, devise solutions, and drive reforms and innovations necessary to ensure equity, fairness and access to justice for all Marylanders.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has made a civil justice system already difficult to navigate even more complicated and inaccessible,” said Attorney General Frosh. “Massive job losses and difficulty obtaining unemployment benefits will result in a myriad of life-threatening consequences, including loss of housing and lack of basic necessities like health care and food. The Task Force and Congressional Advisory Committee brings together some of the best and brightest leaders in our state to help develop solutions to many of the dire situations confronting so many of our friends and neighbors.”

“Equal justice under law is a right not a privilege,” said Reena K. Shaw, Executive Director of the Maryland Access to Justice Commission. “Access to Justice means that anyone encountering the civil justice system - which adjudicates issues like evictions, consumer debt and domestic violence - should have a fair shake at justice. But even before COVID-19, people were losing their cases, not because they did anything wrong, but because they did not have the legal information or help they needed. COVID-19 has made that problem worse, and unless we act now, the consequences of injustice will endanger public health, hamper economic recovery, and be disproportionately harmful to black families. The Maryland Access to Justice Commission is proud to partner with the Attorney General during this unprecedented time to advance the promise of equal justice for all.”

As an example of the impact on Marylanders, two individuals shared their stories:

Ms. White: An existing food stamp recipient, she received food stamps on the 23rd of every month. But when she went to the grocery store in April, she was shocked and embarrassed when the store clerk told her she did not have any money on her card. She called the number for DSS over and over again, but could not get in touch with anyone. This went on for two months. She had to resort to going to the food pantry. She called the offices of public officials many times, but no one ever returned her calls. She finally received help from the Homeless Persons Representation Project and they were able to help her reinstate her benefits in very short order.

Ms. Fowler: Her family was evicted and she came to Baltimore. She was connected to Rapid Rehousing resources and given access to food banks to get back up on her feet. She soon started looking for work. After about 5 jobs, she found one that really fit her well, allowing her to get her own apartment and sustain herself. She was a banquet server for 8 months before the pandemic hit. She was an “on-call” employee, so she did not receive health benefits through her job. She was laid off in March, but the company told her they would hold her position for her. After the layoff, having no other source of income, she tried applying for unemployment. She tried and tried, but could not get through and had no income for two months. She has a 4-year old that she was supporting. Then, she tried to apply for TANF and TCA, and encountered the same problems. She had to rely on food banks. She is eagerly looking to get back to work, but does not know how she can because of child care challenges. She was finally able to get her unemployment check, but knows many others that are still unable to receive unemployment benefits.

Task Force Focus Areas

Keep Marylanders Housed.

Even before COVID-19, Maryland had an out-sized number of eviction filings and judgments. When the moratorium on evictions lifts on July 25, renters will face an avalanche of new actions. To prevent mass displacement, we must identify and connect families to rental assistance programs, provide ways for parties to resolve problems outside the courts, and expand resources available to tenants within the courts.

Keep Marylanders Fed.

The Maryland Food Bank saw an 82% increase in the amount of food delivered in April 2020 in comparison to 2019. From their estimates, almost 1 million Marylanders may find themselves food insecure because of COVID-19. Attorneys from legal services organizations report that many Marylanders face barriers in receiving their benefits or are being wrongfully denied. To

ensure that Marylanders are able to feed their families, we must identify the barriers to accessing unemployment public benefits and opportunities to expand access to these critical services.

Keep Marylanders Safe.

More than 2,600 Marylanders have died from the COVID-19 virus and thousands more have tested positive and been hospitalized. Hardest hit have been essential workers—healthcare, food, transportation, and delivery workers who are disproportionately people of color and lack adequate personal protective equipment, testing, and other recommended safeguards. The stress and anxiety caused by job loss and forced social distancing has compounded these outcomes, causing many health care practitioners and victim advocates to predict an increase in domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse and neglect.

Keep Marylanders Secure.

COVID-19 has devastated our economy, causing record unemployment rates—nearly 15% nationwide and nearly 10% in Maryland—concentrated among low-wage workers. The State has reported receiving more than 600,000 claims for unemployment insurance since the pandemic began, though backlogs and delays suggest the number of people in need may be even higher. Beyond the resulting food and housing insecurity, many of these families will also face mounting medical and consumer debts and debt collection lawsuits.

Keep Marylanders Connected.

Too many in our state do not have access to technology or the internet, yet our courts will be moving to conducting remote hearings and online dispute resolution. We have to work together to make sure that entire swaths of our populations are not left out of our justice system because they do not have access to technology or the internet. It is also critical that our work be done in collaboration with representatives of all impacted communities and disseminated in clear, succinct and accurate plain-language information on various platforms to ensure that it is accessible to self-represented litigants, community partners and the general public.

Attorney General’s COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force Members

Congressional Advisory Committee:

Ben Cardin
U.S. Senator

Chris Van Hollen
U.S. Senator

Anthony Brown
U.S. Representative
4th Congressional District of Maryland

Steny Hoyer
U.S. Representative
5th Congressional District of Maryland

Kweisi Mfume
U.S. Representative
7th Congressional District of Maryland

Jamie Raskin
U.S. Representative
8th Congressional District of Maryland

Dutch Ruppersberger
U.S. Representative
2nd Congressional District of Maryland

John Sarbanes
U.S. Representative
3rd Congressional District of Maryland

David Trone
U.S. Representative

6th Congressional District of Maryland

Task Force:

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Former Senior Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit

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Designee for Maryland House Speaker, Adrienne Jones

Robert M. Bell
Former Chief Judge, Maryland Court of Appeals

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Designee for Senate President, Bill Ferguson

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President, Maryland Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD)

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