

Testifying on a Bill

Why Testifying Matters

Having a large group of people sign up to share their support of a bill clearly demonstrates that people are paying attention to the issue-area to our legislators. It is an important way to apply pressure to the process and demonstrate the necessity of the bill, and the impact it will have.

A bill's hearing is a crucial step in the legislative process, and public participation is a vital way to demonstrate your support. You can participate in the hearing in three ways: by submitting written testimony only, by speaking at the hearing only, or by submitting written testimony and speaking during the hearing. As of the 2023 session, you can testify in person, or virtually via Zoom, though in person is preferred.

While speaking at a bill's hearing is the most impactful way to show your support, it can be challenging for people with work or childcare responsibilities. The hearings start in the afternoon on Tuesdays - Fridays, usually around 1pm, and can go late into the night. You will know how many bills are being heard before the day of the hearing, but the schedule for the bills order is generally not posted until shortly before the hearing. While each person testifying is limited in the time they can speak, there is no limit on how many people can sign up to testify. Uncontroversial bills can have their hearing take less than 10 minutes, but bills with a lot of support or opposition can have their hearing take hours. Therefore, even knowing the bill order, it is extremely hard to predict when the hearing on a specific bill on the list will take place. It can feel like an inefficient waiting game - but your voice is important, and testifying makes a difference. If you have scheduling concerns, it is best to just submit written testimony so that you don't go to Annapolis, only to have to leave before you can share your thoughts.

Tips for Writing Testimony

If you are interested in testifying in person, or submitting written testimony, we have a few tips to make your testimony as effective as possible.

The most important thing to remember is that you don't need to be an expert on the issue-area of the bill! Legislators are hearing the statistics and facts, which are very important, from advocates and lobbyists. However, if you are testifying as an individual, or as part of a grassroots volunteer organization, sharing your personal connection to the bill, and why you care enough to take time to come to Annapolis to raise your voice, is just as important - and can be even more powerful.

It is also important to make your testimony concise and to the point. If you are testifying in person, testimony is generally limited to two minutes - it goes by quicker than you think! If you are submitting written testimony, legislators are more likely to look at it if it is short and clearly states your position on the bill. It is best to keep written testimony under one page.

If you are working with a coalition or organization on a bill, defer to them for any testimony templates or other important pieces to mention in your testimony.

An Outline for Testimony

To start your testimony, address it to the Chair and Vice Chair, and members of the committee the bill is being heard in. Start the first paragraph by sharing your name, which legislative district you live in, and your position on the bill - include bill numbers and name. Then, briefly describe who you are, name any organizations you belong to, and any affiliations or titles you have that may be relevant to the bill.

Next, dive deeper into your personal story. Name what connects and motivates you to be sharing testimony on this specific bill. On some bills, this can feel extremely personal and vulnerable and we applaud your willingness to do so. Share as much or as little as you feel comfortable with, while keeping it concise. Also share how you think this bill will improve your life, the lives of people in your community, and across the state, and how the bill could've changed the outcome when your personal story happened.

In your closing paragraph, re-state your position on the bill and why you think it is important. End with: I respectfully urge this committee to return a (favorable/favorable with amendments/unfavorable) report on (HB#/SB#). And then thank the committee members for their time and consideration.

Submitting Testimony

Regardless of whether you are submitted written testimony, speaking at the hearing, or both, you will need to register online using the MyMGA portal. You can only sign up to testify on a specific bill during a set time window. For hearings in the House of Delegates, you must sign up two business days before the hearing; between 8am - 3pm. For hearings in the Senate, you must sign up one business day before the hearing; between 8am - 3pm. This is a strict deadline - the website will no longer accept submissions starting at 3:01pm.

To create a MyMGA account, go to <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/> and click on the red "MyMGA" icon in the top right, next to the social media account icons. If you do not have an account yet, click register, fill out the required information and complete any verification instructions. Once your account is set up, or if you already have an account, sign in.

Once you've signed in, click the 'witness signup' tab on the left hand navigation bar. All of the bills that are taking testimony submissions at that time will appear on a list. You can use the committee drop down bar at the top of the page to navigate directly to the committee you wish to sign up for, or click command + F (Mac) or control + F (PC) and enter the bill number in the search bar to easily find the bill you are looking for.

Once you've found the bill you want to testify for, select your position on the bill's drop down menu, and then what type of testimony you plan to provide. Once you've selected written testimony, or oral and written testimony, an 'upload' button will appear. Click this button and select your testimony file. Your testimony must be in PDF format in order to be uploaded, and

you can add up to ten PDF files. Once you've uploaded the files click 'ok' - make sure that there is a check mark next to the bill number, scroll up to the top of the page and press 'save.' Your testimony/position will not be registered unless you click 'save.'

You can edit files after you've uploaded them by clicking 'edit files' next to the bill you've signed up for - you can add or remove files until the testimony submission deadline that day. Make sure to click the 'save' button any time you make changes to any of the bills you are signed up for.

If you want to confirm your submission, click the 'signed up items' tab at the top of the page.

To see a visual step-by-step guide of how to sign up and upload written testimony, [click here](#).

