



Agudath Israel of Maryland 2024 Legislative Review

The Maryland General Assembly concluded its annual 90-day legislative session on Sine Die, Monday, April 8 at midnight. Our brief Sine Die video update was filmed in the hours immediately after session's end, and offered a quick recap.

Here is a more comprehensive review of the 2024 legislative session.

The 2024 legislative session, year number two of Governor Wes Moore's administration, began on January 10th with an acute focus on fiscal restraint. After his first session - a year prior - was marked by financial flexibility due to the post-COVID surplus, legislators returned to Annapolis in 2024 with the budget purse-strings tied tighter than usual. Most bills with large fiscal burdens were set on the side, with policy-heavy legislation getting more of the attention.

Despite this, Agudah Maryland was pleased with progress made on both the budget and legislative sides of our 2024 agenda.

Another Year of BOOST – Many of you will remember the fight to “save our BOOST” last year.

BOOST

Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today

This year, the initial budget draft appeared poised to once again phase the vital scholarship program out, but a quick reaction by our team led to a draft revision that removed the phase-out language. Thankfully, the BOOST program did not face coordinated opposition this year, and it continues to be an invaluable resource for parents seeking financial support for their children's nonpublic school education.

As in previous years, the majority of the \$9 million allocation will be awarded to students who received BOOST scholarships in the past school year. New applicants who are siblings of last year's recipients were also awarded a scholarship. Remaining funds were used to support students transferring from public to private schools, followed by new applicants from nonpublic schools. Unfortunately, due to the limited amount of funds in the program, many students are unlikely to receive a scholarship despite their eligibility. We will continue advocating for the program and will seek to expand the allocation so that more children can be served.

A Crucial and Timely Budget Fix - Towards the end of session, we authored, lobbied, and ultimately secured a critical update to key language in the state budget that determines a school's tuition threshold to be eligible for the state funding programs. We had earlier discovered that the existing language was being interpreted in a manner that would disqualify some of our schools. Securing this critical fix was widely commended by veteran education officials who have worked with the funding programs since their inception.



More from the budget – The budget included additional nonpublic school allocations: the textbook and technology program (\$6 million) and the aging schools facilities grant (\$3.5 million) were both level-funded as they have been in the past. The security grants for schools

(\$3 million) and nonprofit organizations (\$5 million) that are deemed to be at risk of a hate crime (and thus only available to a much smaller list of entities) add an additional \$8 million for security improvements, equipment, or personnel. Finally, the Health and Security Program provides an additional allocation of \$2.5 million for schools to use for nursing/medical costs or safety improvements.

School Bus Bill – As reported in last year’s end-of-session report, the results of the school bus tax credit bill sponsored by Delegate Attar and Senator Hettleman during the 2023 session yielded a state taskforce to study different options for a future bill to provide transportation for nonpublic schools and students. Agudah Maryland was granted a spot on the taskforce which deliberated for many hours during



the 2023 summer identifying different proposals to pursue.

After the work of the taskforce was complete, the bill draft that came forth in early 2024 closely resembled the initial draft of the 2023 legislation, confirming that utilizing a tax credit model for school transportation costs was indeed the most practical approach to pursue.

However, as expected, the budget challenges facing the legislature presented all bills with a fiscal note in the millions with opposition right out of the gate. Despite that problem, due to the work of the taskforce and the diligence of Delegate Attar, \$500K of funds was set aside in the final budget to enact a small pilot program for private school busing in Baltimore and Montgomery Counties.

We are hopeful that this pilot program will be an effective complement alongside our MTA bus program and will demonstrate to state officials that it’s worthy of future growth and expansion.

The World Post October 7th - For the past half a year our eyes and hearts have been focused on events in Eretz Yisrael, but we are also keenly aware that antisemitism is alive and well in the US and abroad. We have seen how extremists here in the United States have attempted to leverage current events to delegitimize and isolate the state of Israel. Legislative resolutions calling for Israel to unconditionally cease fire while glossing over the crimes of Hamas have passed in many other states and locales. In Maryland, there were attempts to pass a resolution highlighting the destruction in Gaza without acknowledging Hamas’s responsibility and calling for an immediate ceasefire, attempts to pass a different resolution condemning “anti-Palestinian hate” (without including any condemnation of anti-Israeli hate, despite many incidents in Maryland and beyond), and an attempt to sanction “unauthorized support of Israeli settlement activity.” Thankfully, these resolutions did not garner broad support and were soundly defeated.



Hate crimes and Anti-Semitism – In 2023, the Maryland General Assembly established the Maryland Commission on Hate Crime Response and Prevention to coordinate anti-hate crime strategy amongst the various groups at risk of being targeted.

In the aftermath of the October 7th atrocities, the director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) Maryland office posted multiple anti-semitic conspiratorial remarks on social media. At the time, Maryland Attorney General Anthony Brown suspended her from the State Commission on Hate Crimes Response and Prevention, but then reinstated her, explaining that the language of the General Assembly establishing the commission did not give him the authority to suspend members for improper conduct.

In view of a number of highly objectionable statements from CAIR affiliates, Delegate Attar introduced a bill to remove CAIR from the Hate Crimes Commission and replace them with a different representative for Maryland's Muslim community. The bill passed and has been approved by Governor Moore, and Attorney General Brown subsequently appointed someone else to the commission. Additionally, a separate bill allowing for the removal of committee members in cases of misconduct was passed and signed.

Religious Accommodation – Accommodations to protect the identity and observance of people and communities of faith are a crucial safeguard for religious Jews. Whether it's on an individual basis, like employers reluctant to grant leeway for Shabbos/Yom Tov observance or ensuring that end-of-life and post-mortem sensitivities are protected; or broadly applied regulations impacting communal halachic observance, issues such as these are a major area of focus for our office. In a recent case, a shul in Harford County contacted our office after they were told that in order to be in compliance with government building code, they would need to install motion sensor lights in their building - used primarily on Shabbos - in order to be allowed to proceed with their construction. Although in that particular case the issue was resolved without requiring a legislative bill, it behooved us to address the issue before similar issues posing serious halachic challenges arise.



Together with local Harford County officials and Delegate Mike Griffith (whose legislative district includes the shul in question), a bill was introduced that would allow local building officials to seek advice from the Attorney General's Office to help ensure that regulation enforcement properly addresses religious concerns. Thankfully, the bill passed, thus providing an important pathway to resolving issues that may arise in future.

Special Education – With the opening in the fall of 2023 of Yahalom Maryland, our office has increased its focus on helping individuals with special needs and their families. On the legislative front, we supported the successful effort to create a state fund for qualifying families with a special needs child to help them cover the costs of legal fees when they dispute the terms of their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP). This vital measure, which will ensure special needs children receive their necessary services, was something for which special ed advocates worked for a number of years.



Physician assisted suicide – Since 2016, we have worked alongside faith groups, disability-rights groups, and elder-care advocacy organizations to strongly oppose the legislative efforts to legalize physician assisted suicide (PAS). This bill was once again introduced and heard this session, but thankfully failed to garner enough support to be brought for a committee vote in either House or Senate.



Elder Care - Two items of interest to seniors and their families were passed into law this year. Under previous law, households qualifying for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) who had a household member over 62 years old were guaranteed a minimum supplement of \$40. New legislation lowered the minimum age to 60 years or older, and increased the minimum supplement to \$50.



Another new piece of legislation establishes the Caregiver Expense Grant Program. Qualifying households (with a federal adjusted gross income below \$75,000 if filing individually or \$150,000 if filing jointly) who are caregivers for an elderly member of the family will be able to apply for up to \$2,500 for qualifying care expenses.

Universal Lunch Program



– During the COVID period, the federal government removed all income limit thresholds for free school meal eligibility and funded universal lunches for all meal program-participating schools – public and private. Since the federal COVID funds expired, states across the country have undertaken the pursuit to extend those food benefits to include free meals for all students regardless of income. Last year, Agudah Maryland joined the state’s teacher’s union and public school lobbies in advocating for a bill that would allow all students to receive free meals. This year, the potential fiscal costs of such an expansion resulted in reluctance on the part of lawmakers to mandate it without a clear understanding of the costs. Instead, they passed a bill that requires the Department of Education to research and provide a cost estimate of such a project, so that lawmakers will be able to make an informed vote next year.

Acknowledgements – We sincerely thank the many members of the Maryland General Assembly (and their dedicated staffs) with whom we closely work during the session – and before and after it. Their dedication to the households and community members in their districts is quite admirable and the friendship they display to us is ever appreciated.

For the majority of our legislative agenda, we work closely each year with a strong team of similar-minded advocates – among whom is the Maryland Catholic Conference, the Baltimore Jewish Council, the JCRC, and Teach Maryland. Many tense hours are spent in the Annapolis trenches and without that shared trust and teamwork, our successes would be far more limited.

Lastly... please regularly check out our website for an abundance of helpful info to the households and institutions of our community. There are resources there for those seeking to apply for BOOST scholarships, those looking to utilize 529 tuition related benefits, or those looking to receive child care scholarships, as well as all of the security grant programs that your shuls and other nonprofits may be able to access. You will also find our full section on the upcoming election, from voter registration to mail-in ballot information. That site is www.AgudahMD.org

Best wishes and brocho v’hatzlocho!



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