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Maryland House Health and Government Operations Committee in SUPPORT of HB 1539, State Grants Reform

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Good afternoon. I am Jerri Kamicker. I have been a Grants Consultant working with nonprofit clients primarily in the Baltimore Metro area for 13 years. In the past five years, I have submitted about three dozen grant applications to various state agencies on behalf of my clients. Agencies ranged from the Department of Housing and Community Development to the Community Health Resource Commission to the Maryland Historical Trust. I have helped my clients get funds to develop affordable housing, address obesity at an elementary school in Baltimore, offer behavioral health training to nursing home staff, and design a bike and pedestrian path in South Baltimore.

My clients and I are extremely grateful for the state support we have received over the years. But in many cases, the road to that funding has been bumpy. For example:

1. Some agencies are not transparent about what funding is available and when. Not every nonprofit can hire a trained researcher, and even a trained researcher such as myself has difficulty wading through web pages to find new RFPs or a listing of the standard year after year opportunities. Notice of upcoming and standard opportunities would really help with planning for many nonprofits who operate with very lean staffs.
2. Agencies vary widely in their requirements for supporting documents such as organization bylaws and articles of incorporation. Why these are required by some agencies and not others is a mystery to nonprofits. If there is a legal justification, why is it applied by a few agencies and not all? If these are required by the state, it would be most helpful if there was a central repository for them so that a nonprofit would be able to verify currency of old documents or upload new ones once a year rather than every time an application is submitted.
3. In addition, applicants are regularly requested to provide a copy of their SDAT certification or charity registration. These are maintained in state databases and it seems that they should be linked automatically to an applicant's EIN.
4. Applications do vary significantly from one agency to another but some differences are justified. Different questions are necessary for an application for funds for affordable housing demolition, design or construction and another for increasing capacity for behavioral health treatment in Baltimore or more rural areas of the state. There is, however, an issue with long and unwieldy applications, where the questions are repetitious and some are unnecessary.

5. RFPs and funding opportunities from many private funders include a notation about when the review period is and when decisions should be expected. This is extremely helpful for project and staff planning and for ensuring that grant partners can maintain their commitments to one another. This data is often missing in state opportunities. In addition, the process to get a signed grant agreement back to the nonprofit is often slow. Many nonprofits do not have the cash flow or a line of credit to start the work without the agreement and the funds. If one agency's funding process operates like clockwork, why can't all agencies publish at least an estimate of RFP release and due and decision dates, and have a benchmark timeframe for returning a signed grant agreement? Direct communication with applicants when those are delayed would be very helpful.

My clients pay for my services by the hour, so unnecessary application questions and supporting documents or unduly complex budgets or other grant application features reduce their funds for direct client work, from providing health care to the underserved to building a playground in an urban neighborhood to opening historic venues to tourists. Behind the scenes of every decision to submit a grant application is a cost benefit analysis not just about the likelihood of an award, but more importantly, whether the amount of funds justifies the investment in staff and consultant time to develop the proposal.

I support House Bill 1539 and its companion, Senate Bill 630, as amended, so we can begin a collaboration to reform our state's fragmented grants processes to eliminate unnecessary and often duplicative paperwork and administrative practices. My only reservation is whether the proposed number of participants from the nonprofit community is sufficient given the large number of state agency representatives who would be included, along with representatives from the Maryland Association of Counties and the Maryland Municipal League. In addition, I would be happy to provide expertise to the committee or working groups during this process.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.