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The Honorable Wes Moore
Governor
100 State Circle
Annapolis, MD 21401

SENT VIA EMAIL TO: Fagan Harris: fagan.harris2@maryland.gov
Eric Luedtke: eric.luedtke@maryland.gov

RE: HB1258's decimating effects on local media – PLEASE VETO

Dear Governor Moore:

The Maryland Delaware DC Press Association (“MDDC”) represents virtually all of the local online and print journalism outlets in the State. As such, our members inform their communities, perform the traditional watchdog function of journalism through critical reporting, and encourage civic engagement by reporting on activities within the community. We believe that HB 1258 will create a seismic change in the local media landscape that will decimate and potentially prompt the closure of local news outlets.

We respectfully ask you to veto HB1258, which would move all public notices from every Register of Wills office in the State to a centralized online website operated by the Register of Wills. Under current law, the aforementioned register and representatives must provide notice in a newspaper of general circulation for a certain amount of time to provide notice to creditors for any outstanding debt owed by the decedent and notice of death to the heirs of the decedent.

Cataclysmic change sounds dramatic. Local news, however, is on the precipice. HB 1258 will abandon a system of public notice that has worked well for decades and eliminate a significant number of jobs in Maryland. Local news will go away if communities, governments and others do not support it. Studies show that when a community loses its source of local news, it experiences decreased voter turnout and civic engagement; increased municipal borrowing costs that lead to higher taxes; and decreased transparency among government and business officials, leading to increased waste, fraud, and abuse. As newspapers shutter, [communities become more polarized](#), leaving us stuck in a never-ending doom loop where we lose sight of our shared values.

Here's why we believe this bill is bad public policy and should be vetoed.

This legislation was drafted without any input from the newspapers in our state, which have, for decades and in some cases, centuries, faithfully served their communities with providing public notices and regularly communicate with their local Register of Wills offices. There was no robust debate on this topic; the material submitted by the registers was very one-sided and, in many



We believe a strong news media is central to a strong and open society. Read local news from around the region at www.mddcnews.com

instances, incomplete, misleading, inaccurate and full of innuendo. We believe that the bill deserves a more thorough examination before legislators during the hearing process.

The bill's fiscal note did not consider the impact on small business in Maryland. The cost to local businesses (newspapers) is significant and will have a direct impact on reporting positions. By the Register of Will's own testimony, the effect of this legislation will be nearly \$1.7 million. That money will go directly out of news media and local reporting. Some publications may merge with others; some may go out of business. To sign into law a measure that will have a cataclysmic impact on longtime businesses and their employees across the state, without an honest discussion of its merits, serves no one.

The Register of Wills website may post the notices at no cost, but there is a price. Web only access requires that everyone in the community have internet access AND knows where to access the information. This bill will leave underserved communities out. Community members and businesses who check whether their customers have estates have always looked to the news media for this information. Notices should be in places where the general community looks for news and information, not just in a specific, court-run database. Moreover, in addition to the print and online notices that publications provide, MDDC already aggregates all notices published by members in an online database, free of charge to the public. The Register of Wills has replicated what has always been a part of the industry's commitment to public notice.

Audience and visibility is important to appropriate public notice. The Register of Wills claims that their website comes up first in Google results. What it does not show is that the MDDC website shows up on that first page of results as well. News media is in the business of audience development and dissemination of information, and the traffic to both member websites and the MDDCNews.com aggregated site dwarfs a state website. Having notices in the context of other news and information the public searches make notices more visible. That will not happen under this bill.

Our industry research shows that the public does not want public notices (which include estate notices) on government websites. This bill does not reflect the public's will. It is telling that only Registers of Wills testified in favor of the bill, and for reasons of their own convenience. In MDDC's statewide readership survey (conducted in the Fall of 2023), members polled their readers about their reading habits and what is important to them. Thirty-eight publications from across the state are represented in the survey, from The Baltimore Sun to the Hancock News to the Dorchester Banner. We found that 74% of readers felt that their local publication's coverage of Public Notices was somewhat, very, or extremely important to them. Seventy-one percent of readers indicated that they read public notices in their local publication at least occasionally. We also asked specifically, "Do you prefer important public notices to be published in the local newspaper and its website or posted on a government-operated website?" The answer was overwhelming. 67.53% of respondents preferred public notices to be published in their local newspaper and its website.

Local news was also central to readers, who indicated Breaking News (62.41%), State and Local Government (55.76%) and Police & Crime (48.93%) as Extremely Important to them. These topics require local reporters – journalists whose livelihoods are threatened by this bill.

This bill has no transition or ramp to show people where these notices will be located when they have always been in their local newspaper. It simply flicks a switch October 1 and does not anticipate any communications to the public. This does not put the public at the center; it is a disservice to the communities that rely on their local newspapers for customary news and information.

Having these notices appear only on a court website diminishes the independence of notice as the agency placing the notice is the one that is publishing the notice. Websites can be hacked and can go down and this information will not be accessible to all. One of the benefits that the Register of Wills touts for online notices are that “changes may be made instantly,” calling into question the stability and integrity of the data. The print publication is a tangible, permanent record that is archived by publications and libraries, containing the records of an entire community.

Our member publications are committed to their communities, employing local journalists and other professionals, occupying office space, contributing the community and often serving as media sponsors and supporters of community events. All this will be drastically affected if HB 1258 becomes law. Those jobs won't come back; some publications will not be able to stay in business. Sustaining a \$1.7 million hit industry wide among the other economic pressures will surely mean smaller newsrooms and shoestring operations. Many decry the lack of local ownership for news media, but it is extremely difficult to survive economically as an individual local news outlet in Maryland. Please do not let HB 1258 pass into law and further decimate the news media in Maryland.

We urge you to VETO HB 1258.

Respectfully,

Rebecca Snyder
MDDC Press Association