

MARYLAND



State senator pushes bill to bolster voter protections

By Taylor DeVill

Disturbed by Baltimore County's redistricting process — which has resulted in a lawsuit against the County Council by civil rights groups — a state senator is proposing legislation that seeks to empower Maryland's attorney general to intervene when local governments violate federal voting laws.

Sponsored by Democratic Sen. Charles Sydnor III, the bill's goal is to shore up voting protections for minorities by making it clear that the state attorney general has the authority to apply federal voting rights laws to intervene in local government decisions over redistricting, polling places, early voting access and more, if those decisions could dilute or impair the power of minority voters.

"The circumstances that have occurred in Baltimore County certainly opened my eyes to [problems] that I didn't know existed here in the state," Sydnor said.

The Baltimore County Council in December approved new councilmanic districts that retain just one majority-Black district in a jurisdiction that is 30% Black and almost 50% nonwhite, despite warnings from civil rights groups — including the Baltimore County and Randallstown NAACP chapters — that doing so would invite litigation.

The county NAACP joined residents, Sydnor, Common Cause Maryland and the League of Women Voters of Baltimore County in filing the lawsuit, alleging council members violated federal voting laws by packing one district with a more than 70% Black populace and splitting Black voters among other adjacent districts.

The groups said more than one majority-Black district could be drawn, but county officials argued that doing so would split communities.

Democratic County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr. has not yet taken a position on Sydnor's proposal, county spokesman Sean Naron said.

Neither has the ACLU of Maryland, which is representing the plaintiffs in the lawsuit against the County Council.

The bill, if passed, wouldn't affect the litigation the county currently faces, given its timing, Sydnor said. If approved, the legislation would take effect immediately.

Virginia is the latest among a handful of states to empower its attorney general to enforce voting rights laws amid U.S. Supreme Court rulings that have weakened federal protections. New York's legislature is taking up similar legislation.

"Where you can really impact an election is in local districts — where voting polls are placed, where registration opportunities are placed," said Roger Hartley, dean of the University of Baltimore's College of Public Affairs. "That's where you can really, potentially, diminish turnout or make it harder, in this case, for a protected class to elect a member of their community."

The recourse available to constituents now is either to sue — a lengthy and costly avenue for the few voting rights lawyers in the U.S. — or bring the matter before the U.S. Department of Justice, which largely does not have the capacity to pursue such charges, said Perry Grossman, a supervising attorney at the New York Civil Liberties Union. Grossman, who is also an adjunct professor at Fordham University in New York City, estimates that fewer than 1,000 lawyers in the U.S. specialize in voting rights laws.

"These are really hard cases and we need more people to bring them — more well-resourced people," Grossman said. "There's real weight behind what attorneys general do. It's a combination of resources and clout that make them good actors to want to bring into the game."

Sydnor said he approached Democratic Attorney General Brian Frosh's office before the Baltimore County district lines were approved and asked about his authority to intervene.

He said he was told the office was constrained in its ability to respond to the redistricting plan.

Frosh's "authority to enforce the state's elections laws is pretty limited," according to Raquel Coombs, spokesperson for the attorney general's office. Most criminal and civil enforcement generally falls to the Office of the State Prosecutor, she said.

That office did not respond Monday to a request for comment.

Grossman said enacting voter protections at the state level affirms the role attorneys general should be filling to combat voter suppression — especially after the U.S. Senate failed to pass sweeping voting reform and as states like Texas and Georgia seek to restrict voting rights.

Maryland lawmakers could strengthen the proposal by adding a provision establishing "preclearance authority," which could require jurisdictions to get state approval of any change to their electoral laws or procedures. New York's bill would let the state civil rights agency or a court decide on the changes.

"If Maryland had a law like that preclearance, it would be less unusual to try and bring the AG into the process," Grossman said.

NEWSMAKER

Sickle Cell Disease Association of America arrives at 50th anniversary

Organization has a new leader; mission remains

By John-John Williams IV

Regina Hartfield vividly remembers her first encounter with sickle cell disease and its lasting impact on Black Americans. Her mother was a pediatric nurse in New York City who worked with newborns who were affected by the disorder. She learned that early identification and treatment were key.

"I remembered so many times we would be out and about and she would run into young people who she had taken care of over the years," the 62-year-old recalled. "She knew the challenge that they had faced early on in their lives. She was very proud of that."

As the newly named president and CEO of the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America, Hartfield is tasked with leading the Hanover-based organization in its 50th year.

"One of the most important lessons learned throughout my career is the ability to listen," said Hartfield, who began her new position Jan. 14. "The impact of listening is critical."

Sickle cell disease primarily affects those whose ancestors are from sub-Saharan Africa; South America, the Caribbean and Central America; Saudi Arabia; India; and Mediterranean countries. The disease, which is generally diagnosed at a young age, affects around 100,000 Americans. It occurs in about one out of every 365 Black births.

The blood-based disease is inherited and causes red blood cells to form a sickle shape, which results in blockages that prevent blood from circulating throughout the body. As a result, those affected by the disease can experience anemia, gallstones, stroke, chronic pain, organ damage and premature death. No cure exists, though researchers are trying to fine one.

In recent years, there have been a number of breakthroughs in treatments. Until 2019, there was just one FDA-approved drug, hydroxyurea, which combats sickle cell by making red blood cells larger. Then, in 2019, the FDA approved three additional drugs.

"The advances that have already been made are very, very promising," Hartfield said. "Chances for a universal cure are bright."

Hartfield, a New York City native, graduated with honors from Lehman College of the City University of New York with a bachelor of arts degree in community outreach.

Before joining the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America, Hartfield was a manager for federal, state and commercial contracts for CVP, an information technology consulting firm in Virginia and Maryland.

Hartfield also was a community affairs professional in the nonprofit world in New York for more than 25 years. She was senior vice president for programs and outreach for the Prospect Park Alliance. And she served as community affairs and special project manager at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. Hartfield was the first community relations coordinator at The New York Botanical Garden.

Hartfield, who lives on the Eastern Shore, has served on the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America's board of directors for three years, including as chair of the fundraising committee.

The association's board chairman, Thomas Johnson, is confident Hartfield has the skills to continue to advance the association into its 50th year.

"I think she appeals to every segment of the constituency. She has a real passion for the organization," Johnson said. "She is well respected by the member associations. She



Hartfield

has gained quite a bit of confidence with the staff. She has a great demeanor, but she is very driven."

Johnson was introduced to Hartfield three years ago when she joined the association's board. He was immediately struck by her abilities as chair of the fundraising committee.

"The way she was proactive ... regarding our fundraising efforts made me think that she was someone I could see in a leadership position," Johnson said.

"She has a unique ability to gain confidence from different constituencies," Johnson said. "She also wants to achieve great things for the organization. It's rare that you find both competencies that are that strong with one person."

Hartfield is focused on improving partnerships with the association's 53 member organizations in 29 states representing 500,000 people.

"I'm looking forward to meeting and hearing from members of the association — those in research, the community, everyone," she said.

Hartfield also wants to continue to support the association's sickle cell disease clinical trial finder, which was unveiled in October. The database, which also comes in an app for iOS and Android, was the brainchild of Hartfield's predecessor, Beverley Francis-Gibson, who left the association when Hartfield took over.

"We're excited about the potential," she said. "It can translate to better treatment and better quality of life for people who have sickle cell."

This article is part of our Newsmaker series, which profiles notable people in the Baltimore region who are having an impact in our diverse communities. If you'd like to suggest someone who should be profiled, please send their name and a short description of what they are doing to make a difference to: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Editor Kamau High at khigh@baltsun.com.



Reacting to the purple, Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan jokes about the "Ravens Edition" of a BMW M3. BMW moved its vehicle distribution center to Tradeport Atlantic in Sparrows Point to scale up capacity. **KARL MERTON FERRON/THE BALTIMORE SUN**

BMW opens vehicle distribution center in Sparrows Point

Automaker has capacity to process 100K vehicles a year

By Lorraine Mirabella

German automaker BMW officially launched an expanded vehicle distribution center Monday at Tradeport Atlantic in Sparrows Point, relocating from the state-owned Dundalk Marine Terminal to meet increased demand.

BMW began ramping up work in October at the new facility, which was built to process BMW and Mini vehicles that are shipped to the Port of Baltimore from manufacturing plants in Europe, Mexico and elsewhere. Vehicles are then sent to about 126 dealers in the Eastern and Midwest United States.

The automaker, which now employs more than 70 people at Sparrows Point, has the capacity to process about 100,000 imported vehicles a year. Workers at the new facility inspect vehicles, install accessories, and do repairs and maintenance.

The new 75,000-square-foot center on 35 acres is nearly double the space of the facility BMW operated at the previous site on Broening Highway, under a March 2010 deal with the Maryland Port Administration. At that facility, BMW outsourced much of the processing work, hiring contractors.

At Tradeport, BMW has a long-term lease and has room to grow, said Claus Eberhart, vice president of aftersales for BMW of North America.

"It's a long-term commitment," Eber-

hart said in an interview Monday. "It's the center of gravity. The fact that we stay here in the Baltimore area tells you a lot. It's a very good location, but we needed more space to process the volumes coming through here."

The Port of Baltimore is the nation's largest importer and exporter of automobiles.

BMW officials said logistical advantages include access to deep-water berths and proximity to rail and highway transportation that allows cars to be processed within two days of arriving at the center. About 50% of the vehicles are pre-sold, Eberhart said.

Officials with BMW and Tradeport kicked off the facility's launch with a ceremony Monday attended by Gov. Larry Hogan, Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr. and U.S. Sen. Chris Van Hollen, among others.

"Today we are seeing yet another shining example of our growing economy as we celebrate two great companies coming together to forge an innovative, transformative and forward-thinking partnership," said Hogan, citing BMW and Tradeport Atlantic.

The governor noted that BMW, whose largest plant is in Spartanburg, South Carolina, has become the leading exporter of vehicles from the U.S. by value for the past seven years, according to the automaker.

"The job creation and associated economic benefits are a real game changer," Hogan said.

The vehicle distribution center is one of the most recent uses at Tradeport Atlantic in the southeastern Baltimore County, the former home of Bethlehem Steel's former mill and shipyard. The steel mill, which had employed 30,000 people at its peak, had a

series of owners before the last, RG Steel, filed for bankruptcy and shut down operations in 2012.

Tradeport has built 8 million square feet of space for distribution, warehousing and industrial uses, and plans eventually to double in size. More than 20 companies, such as Home Depot, FedEx, Amazon and Under Armour, operate warehouse and distribution facilities there.

Last summer, Volkswagen Group of America opened a terminal at Tradeport to serve about 302 of its auto dealers, a \$150 million investment that created about 100 jobs. That facility processes Volkswagen, Audi, Lamborghini and Bentley vehicles. Volkswagen officials said they chose the site partly because the area's connection to a national rail network and major highways would enable faster delivery times to dealerships. The arrival of Volkswagen and the expansion and long-term commitment of BMW will be a boost to the port, said William Doyle, executive director of the Maryland Port Administration.

"We don't have the space across the bay to build these facilities, the land has run out for these types of facilities," Doyle said. "So in order to use the port of Baltimore, it's built here at Tradeport Atlantic."

"Our relationship, port of Baltimore and Tradeport Atlantic, is the same," he said. "Our goals are the same — jobs, distribution centers." The Sparrows Point facility is one of five U.S. distribution centers operated by BMW of North America, with others in New Jersey, Georgia, Texas and California, serving 350 BMW dealers and 105 Mini dealers nationwide.