



HOWARD COUNTY OFFICE OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUITY

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Calvin Ball, County Executive, • Brandee Ganz, Chief Administrative Officer

LaKeisha McClendon, Administrator

Subject: Written Testimony regarding the creation of Interfaith Advisory Commission

To: Brandee Ganz,
Chief Administrative Officer

From: LaKeisha McClendon, Administrator
Office of Human Rights & Equity

Date: February 19, 2026

The Office of Human Rights and Equity, OHRE, is in support of the creation of the Interfaith Advisory Commission, which will be contained in the Howard County Code, Section 12.219.

Faith communities across the country and in Howard County have long served as anchors of compassion, service, and stability. They are thriving hubs of community engagement and are trusted voices in times of both celebration and crisis. Howard County faith organizations have organized food drives, opened their congregations to support residents in need, and hosted business and community events that strengthen neighborhood connections. In recent years, they have provided safe havens during both natural and spiritual storms, stepping forward when our Ellicott City and Columbia neighbors needed help.

During the COVID 19 pandemic, congregations and similar organizations were critical partners in testing and vaccination distribution efforts. These groups were vital in health outreach, food distribution, and strengthening community resilience. Building on this established trust, County Executive Ball convened the County's first Interfaith Advisory Workgroup in January 2024 to ask a simple but transformative question: What more could we accomplish if government and faith communities worked hand in hand, intentionally and strategically, across every major challenge facing our residents?

The Interfaith Advisory Workgroup was created with a mission of strengthening collaboration between County Government and faith communities across Howard County. Since its formation, the Workgroup has provided insight on matters impacting faith communities, promoted dialogue during times of crisis, and offered guidance on strategies to confront hate, bias, and discrimination.

The creation of the Interfaith Advisory Commission now formalizes and codifies this body within the Howard County Code, ensuring long term sustainability, clear structure, and continued partnership between community leaders and County Government. The Commission will serve as a bridge between government and diverse communities of different beliefs, advising on policies and initiatives that promote inclusion, respect, and shared responsibility for the wellbeing of all residents.

The Office of Human Rights and Equity respectfully request favorable consideration of this legislation.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The first year of this Commission will focus on setting priorities, evaluating community needs, data collection, and establishing strategy and structure for outreach, initiatives, partnerships, and programming. With the OHRE's currently funded positions the office will be able to manage this additional workload. However, OHRE is requesting a minimal budget allocation of \$5,000 in comparison to other OHRE-led Commissions to support the initial term, with any additional expenses in FY27 covered by OHRE's budget. This amount will cover the development and distribution of educational materials, marketing, and outreach essential to establishing and publicizing the work of the Commission.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email, lmccleendon@howardcountymd.gov or by phone at 410-313-6430.