



End of Session Newsletter 2021

Dear Friend:

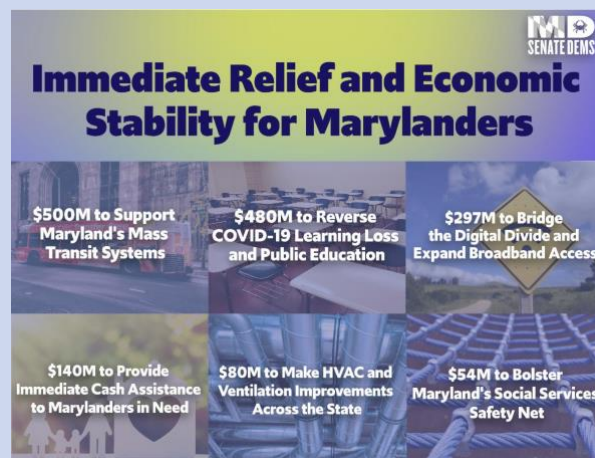
The 2021 Legislative Session of the Maryland General Assembly concluded on Monday, April 12th, wrapping up a herculean effort by my colleagues despite the on-going pandemic and COVID-19 restrictions.

We started the Session not knowing whether we would be able to complete our work without disruption or have the ability to fund significant programs to help Marylanders in need due to the coronavirus. I am pleased to say that, by taking extreme safety precautions and changing the way we worked together as a legislative body, we were able to meet and pass important legislation that will support our shared policy priorities while also enacting a balanced budget as required by the State Constitution. The 2022 budget will fund education, give tax relief to small businesses, support unemployed individuals adversely impacted by COVID-19, and set aside \$2 billion in savings for the future.

The following is a summary of several important topics and initiatives that I worked on this Session. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. If you have any questions or comments about these or any other issues, please do not hesitate to contact me at Brian.Feldman@senate.state.md.us.

The Budget

Beginning with the introduction of Governor Hogan's proposed Fiscal Year 2022 budget in January, discussions in the legislature focused on funding pressing needs, such as direct stimulus payments to struggling Marylanders and providing support for the safe reopening of schools. The \$52.4 billion balanced budget, which includes \$1.5 billion in stimulus aid from the federal government, was fully vetted and unanimously approved by the Senate in a solid display of bipartisanship.



We were able to fund \$600 million for reopening schools, including \$80 million to improve air filtration, heating, and air conditioning in every school building, as well as an additional \$300 million for expanding access to broadband to a half million Marylanders who live without it. To combat the pandemic-induced recession, this budget covers the costs of the bipartisan **RELIEF Act**, which expanded Maryland's Earned Income Tax Credit, cut taxes on unemployment, supported struggling businesses, and sent direct stimulus checks to low-income Marylanders. The State's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund will receive a critical infusion of \$1.1 billion to bolster its solvency, and another **\$100 million will be sent to counties for workforce training**. Additionally, the budget sets aside \$2.1 billion in reserves for the future to eliminate projected deficits for the next two years.

Maryland has also retained its coveted AAA bond rating, one of only 13 states in the nation to receive such a designation from all three rating agencies: S&P Global Ratings (formerly Standard and Poor's), Moody's Investors Service and Fitch Ratings. Maryland holds the longest continuous AAA bond rating of any state in the country and it is an essential component in keeping our borrowing costs low when financing critical capital improvements.

Feldman Bills

In my role as **Vice-Chair of the Senate Finance Committee**, I continued to focus my legislative work in the areas of health care, economic development, and the environment.



Healthcare

Last year, I sponsored legislation that put into place common-sense financial aid policies and practices for Maryland hospitals to follow. Building on that success, this year I introduced and gained passage of the **Medical Debt Protection Act of 2021** to give concrete assistance to patients who suffer from crushing hospital debt. No one should face financial ruin or be plunged into a deeper cycle of poverty simply because they got sick or sought medical care. The Medical Debt Protection

Act places sensible guardrails on collection practices, including prohibiting hospitals from placing liens on a patient's primary residence or from pursuing a wage or bank garnishment to collect medical debt if a patient is uninsured or low-income and eligible for free or reduced cost care. Additionally, the legislature requires hospitals to offer monthly payment plans to patients.

During my tenure as the **Senate Chair of the Maryland Health Insurance Coverage Protection Commission**, Maryland's individual health insurance market premiums have been reduced by 31.5% and the percentage of Marylanders who are uninsured has been cut in half from 12% to 6%. This year, I sponsored a bill that will reinforce that trend by providing assistance for low-income young adults (ages 18-41) to obtain health insurance, and in turn reduce overall premiums in the individual market. To encourage this group to purchase health insurance, my bill creates a **two-year young adult health insurance subsidy pilot program** that will result in increased enrollment, thus further stabilizing the individual market by bringing healthier-than-average people into the market risk pool and bring premiums down for everyone in the individual market. The legislation is modeled after successful programs in several other states.

Fighting Climate Change While Also Boosting Our Economy

Progressive leadership and innovative solutions are needed to combat the complex problems presented by climate change. As the lead sponsor of the **2019 Maryland Clean Energy Jobs Act** which mandates that Maryland obtain 50% of its power from renewable energy sources by 2030, I continue to pursue this two pronged approach of establishing policies that stimulate Maryland's clean energy sector and at the same time protect our environment.

I heard from many of you who advocated for the passage of the **Community Choice Energy** bill that I sponsored with Delegate Charkoudian on behalf of the Montgomery County Delegation. This local bill, similar to laws in nine other states, will permit Montgomery County to establish a pilot program allowing the county to form a Community Choice Aggregator and use its bulk purchasing power to negotiate for diverse sources of energy that should lower and stabilize rates for electricity while helping to meet the county's greenhouse gas reduction goals.

Reducing our greenhouse gas emissions is a critical element in achieving our clean energy goals. Heating and cooling buildings represent a significant portion of greenhouse gas emissions and, in the past, I have worked to expand the use of solar and wind power in Maryland. This session, I have turned my attention to an exciting technology that has been in use for a while but has not been affordable for moderate and low-income families – geothermal – a reliable source of renewable and environmentally-friendly electricity. I sponsored **Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard and Geothermal Heating and Cooling Systems** that incentivizes the use of geothermal heating and cooling. The bill will stimulate the creation of new well-paying Maryland jobs within the geothermal industry and offer clean energy to a broader population. This bi-partisan legislation brought environmentalists, health equity advocates and small business owners together in their support of this initiative and it passed the Senate with a unanimous vote.

Maryland is home to two organizations whose mission is to promote the development of advanced clean energy technologies: the Maryland Clean Energy Center (MCEC) and the Maryland Energy Innovation Institute (MEII). MCEC serves as an incubator for Maryland's clean energy industry, promoting jobs and assisting in the commercialization of innovative technologies. MEII facilities research new technologies and advance local entrepreneurship. This session, I introduced legislation to enhance their goals. The **Clean Energy Innovation Investments and Initiatives** bill enables MCEC and MEII to provide clean energy companies with seed funding, training, and development support. It also establishes MCEC as a state Green Bank to facilitate the financing of clean energy measures on state facilities.

In that same vein, I sponsored legislation that establishes a technical assistance program within the Maryland Technology Development Corporation (TEDCO) to support small early-stage Maryland technology companies in obtaining funding. This will benefit Maryland's innovation economy and move it toward being a global leader.

Legal Reforms

Police Reform

In the wake of the tragic death of George Floyd last summer, the Maryland legislature took action and established a police accountability workgroup to map out how to address the flaws in our current policing law and formulate a blueprint for reform in Maryland. In the Senate, the **Judicial Proceedings Committee** introduced a comprehensive package of legislation to address policing policies. After months of good-faith discussion with all the stakeholders, the Maryland Senate and House of Delegates approved historic legislation that will increase transparency, accountability, and security for all Marylanders.

This police reform package includes legislation that would repeal and replace the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights, create a new statewide use of force standard, allow public access to some police disciplinary records, make it harder to get a no-knock warrant, put investigations of civilian deaths into the hands of an independent unit in the office of the Maryland Attorney General, and provide for body cameras on all officers by July of 2025. Each of these components moves us closer to greater trust and accountability between our communities and those designated to serve and protect them.

Cannabis Reform

One of the most significant bills that I sponsored this session was **Legalization and Regulation of Cannabis for Adult Use**.

Building upon the state's successful medical cannabis program, the bill would have legalized, taxed and regulated cannabis for adult use (ages 21 and over), with an

emphasis on **social equity**. Maryland would have joined 16 other states and the District of Columbia in taxing and regulating a product that is currently operating through an underground, unregulated and illicit market. In addition to realizing hundreds of millions of dollars in new revenue which can be invested back into our State priorities, the law would have ended the senseless arrests of Marylanders for possession of small amounts of cannabis which has had such a negative impact on many of our most vulnerable communities.

Unfortunately, the bill did not pass out of the Finance Committee, but I am pleased that the key issues and concerns were fully vetted this session, and I believe we are now well positioned for its passage in 2022.

Bond Initiatives / Capital Projects

In collaboration with my District 15 colleagues Delegates Kathleen Dumais, David Fraser-Hidalgo and Lily Qi, I am pleased to share that we successfully secured over \$1 million in capital funding for four worthy projects in our community.

Madison House New Day Pavilion Project will support our first responders and frontline healthcare workers by providing them with professional group activities, both virtually and in person, to address the burnout and stress they experience and establish a place for them to recover, refresh and renew, particularly during this national health emergency. This bond initiative funding will be used for construction of the pavilion.



Ivymount School, a nonpublic special education school located in Potomac, serves 200 students with developmental disabilities. This bond initiative will be used to equip the school with the required replacement and upgraded air conditioning systems.

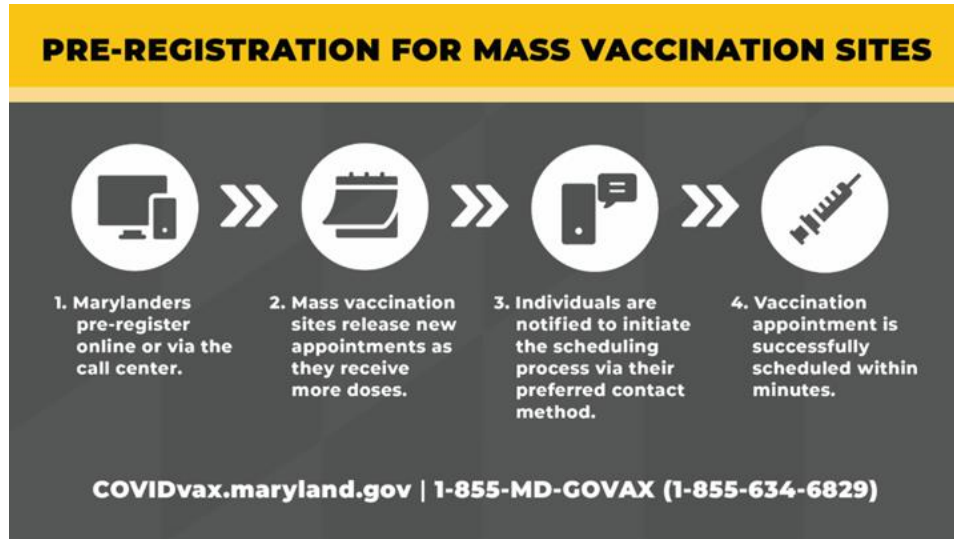
South Germantown Recreational Park is a popular destination for families and adults to develop their mountain biking skills. However, there is currently no vehicle access or ADA-accessible on-site parking at the bike skills area. This project will fund the on-site parking and improve safety and access to the site.

Warrior Canine Connection is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving our nation's veterans and their families. The funding we secured will be used for capital improvements to its "Healing Quarters" to support its unique therapeutic service dog training program and placement of service dogs with wounded veterans. The facility is located on 80 acres of Maryland State parkland in Seneca

Creek State Park in Boyds and is a model public-private partnership serving the needs of returning warriors and veterans.

COVID Relief

Finally, as we continue to face the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, I would like to share with you some resources to assist you and your family.



Maryland Health Benefit Exchange

The Maryland Health Benefit Exchange administers Maryland's health insurance marketplace, known as [Maryland Health Connection](#). On Maryland Health Connection, you can [sign up](#) for health insurance and [estimate benefits](#). If you have questions on how to sign up and receive benefits, please visit <https://www.marylandhbe.com/>.

Maryland Income Tax Extension

This year, the State of Maryland has extended the tax filing deadline to July 15th, 2021. The RELIEF Act extended eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit, provided direct stimulus checks, and modified sales and use tax and tobacco tax filings.

Updated income tax forms are available [HERE](#). If you need assistance, you can call 410-260-7980 from Central Maryland or 1-800-MD-TAXES from elsewhere in the state or email taxhelp@marylandtaxes.gov.

If you have any questions about benefits under the RELIEF Act, contact the Comptroller's office via phone at 1-833-345-0787 or email: ReliefAct@marylandtaxes.gov.

Unemployment Insurance

The pandemic caused an unprecedented number of unemployment claims this past year, and our office has fielded many calls and emails requesting assistance in facilitating communication between constituents and claims agents at the Department of Labor. The FAQ link below answers many questions, but if you still need assistance and are a resident of District 15, please email my office with your address, claim ID number, last 4 digits of your social security number, and a short description of the issue, and we will submit a request for assistance on your behalf.

[The Department of Labor – Frequently Asked Questions](#)

COVID-19 and Vaccinations

To date, almost 40% of Marylanders have been vaccinated with at least one dose, and we are seeing bright and hopeful days ahead as vaccination rates increase each day and normal activities begin to resume. Below are vaccination updates as of the date this newsletter is distributed.

Expanded Eligibility

As of April 12, all Marylanders ages 16 and over are eligible to receive the COVID-19 at any of the State-run mass vaccination sites as well as appointments at any provider in Maryland. Marylanders who were previously eligible and who have already registered for appointments are prioritized. (16- and 17-year-olds can only be vaccinated at sites that use the Pfizer vaccine, the only vaccine that has been approved by the FDA for that age group.)/ Three additional mass vaccination sites at Greenbelt, Timonium, and Germantown recently opened. By the end of April, Maryland is expected to have 12 mass vaccination sites. No appointment is necessary at the Hagerstown and Salisbury vaccination sites.

Maryland pre-registration for all mass vaccination sites (including the Montgomery College-Germantown site) at [OneStop Maryland](#). The phone number is 855-634-6829.

[Ride-on shuttle](#) is free (with appointment) between the Shady Grove metro and Germantown mass vax site.

Montgomery County [pre-registration](#) site. The phone number is 240-777-1755.

Find a vaccination site anywhere in Maryland at the [Vaccination Site Locator](#)

As always, I value your feedback and encourage you to contact me with any questions, comments, or concerns at Brian.Feldman@senate.state.md.us or by phone at 301-858-3169. You can also follow me on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

Sincerely,

