

State House
Annapolis MD 21401

Dear Mr. Speaker:

In accordance with Article II, Section 17 of the Maryland Constitution, I have today vetoed House Bill 57 – Anne Arundel County – Marriage License Fee – Premarriage Education.

House Bill 57 provides that an applicant for a marriage license in Anne Arundel County can receive a \$8 discount on the fee for the license if the applicant demonstrates that the couple has completed a premarriage education course within one year of the application. The Anne Arundel County Health Department must compile a list of premarriage education courses offered in the County and adjacent jurisdictions.

Educating individuals about the demands and realities of marriage and parenthood is a laudable and worthwhile goal. Policymakers in Maryland and across the country struggle to manage the complex issues and social problems associated with the breakup of families. Collectively, we need to do a better job preparing individuals for the very demanding and very rewarding journey of forming and maintaining a family.

House Bill 57, however, lacks sufficient details about the requirements of the proposed course, and potentially limits the counseling options available to couples. House Bill 57 applies only to Anne Arundel County, but may serve as a model for other jurisdictions or a Statewide program. It is important that a statute that establishes a fee reduction program linked to the completion of a premarriage education course provides clear guidance to the public and to the administrators of the program as to what courses are acceptable. In my opinion, House Bill 57 does not do so.

A Florida statute offers a reduced marriage license fee for the completion of a "premarital preparation course." Florida Sec. 741.0305. The statute specifies that the course must be at least 4 hours long. Legislation introduced in prior Sessions of the Maryland General Assembly regarding a similar issue (House Bill 601 of 1996 and House Bill 1253 of 1997, both failed) also would have required that a qualifying course be no less than 4 hours. House Bill 57 does not provide direction to local officials regarding the acceptable minimum duration of a course that would allow applicants to qualify for the discount.

More importantly, the Florida statute clearly lists the qualified instructors who can provide the premarriage course. The statute wisely allows individuals to select professionals who are already subject to State regulation (psychologists, clinical social workers, marriage and family therapists, mental health counselors, and official representatives of a religious organization recognized under Florida law). Each judicial circuit can designate other acceptable providers, and may establish a public roster of course providers in the area. Similarly, a Minnesota bill (Chapter 397, S. F. 884 of 2000), recently vetoed by Governor Ventura, specified that such a course must be provided by a licensed or ordained minister, a person authorized to solemnize marriages under Minnesota law, or a person authorized under Minnesota law to perform marriage and family therapy.