To: House Judiciary Committee and Health, Government and Operations Committee
From: Emily Hecht-McGowan, Family Equality Council
Date: February 10, 2012
RE: Testimony – Civil Marriage Protection Act

My name is Emily Hecht-McGowan and I live in Silver Spring, MD.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you this evening about the Civil Marriage Protection Act.

My wife Sharon and I have lived in Maryland since April of 2010, when we purchased our house in Silver Spring. One of the many reasons we chose to move to Maryland – in addition to the welcoming neighborhoods, excellent schools and the fact that our synagogue was practically around the corner – was that we knew Maryland was one of the few places we could live where our marriage would be recognized. Unfortunately, however, we had to go elsewhere to actually get married.

While this legislation impacts me and my family personally, I am here speaking to you as the Director of Public Policy for the Family Equality Council. We are a national organization working on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents and their children.

According to 2010 Census data, there are 12,538 same-sex couples living together in the state of Maryland. More than 2,500 of these couples are raising approximately 5,000 children in every county across the state. The top five counties with the largest percentages of same-sex couples raising children are – 5) Montgomery; 4) Dorchester; 3) Calvert; 2) Baltimore; and 1) Prince Georges. In general, LGBT families are more racially and ethnically diverse than the general population – and this holds true in Maryland. These Maryland families represent all races, national origins, socioeconomic statuses and religions.

Maryland already recognizes marriages between same-sex couples performed in other jurisdictions so denying the freedom to marry to our own citizens serves no rational purpose. What it does do, however, is inflict direct harm to the 5000 children being raised in Maryland by same-sex couples. These children have become the collateral damage of the discriminatory treatment their parents are receiving.

Decades of research shows that children of gay and lesbian parents grow up to be just as happy and well adjusted as their peers. All major child welfare authorities – including the Child Welfare League of America, the American Psychological Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics – support and actively endorse parenting by gay and lesbian couples. These children thrive despite the disadvantages they face every day because their families are not valued, respected and protected.

Every day we deny access to civil marriage to Maryland’s same-sex couples, their children have to deal with the stigma directed at them and their parents. While many LGBT parents and children live in communities that welcome them, many do not and are faced with discrimination and social stigma. A 2008 study found that 42% of children with LGBT parents were harassed at school because of their family composition. The American
Medical Association stated that denying civil marriage based on sexual orientation is not only discriminatory and imposes harmful stigma on these families, but it also contributes to health care disparities affecting same-sex households including inadequate access to health care, health insurance, and survivor benefits that are afforded opposite-sex households.

The bottom line is that marriage gives couples the tools and the security they need to build a life together and to protect their families. Without access to civil marriage, gay and lesbian couples do not receive the same recognition or protections for their families as other couples. All children deserve the right to insurance coverage, social security benefits, emergency care, inheritance rights and other critical safety nets no matter who their parents are. All families benefit from the intangible reassurance that comes from knowing that your family is safe and secure. With marriage equality:

- Children have automatic and undisputed access to the resources, benefits and entitlements of both of their parents. Married couples do not have to incur any expenses, legal or otherwise, to ensure that both parents have the right to make important medical decisions for their children in case of emergency.

- Children of legally married couples are automatically eligible for health benefits from both parents, as well as child support and visitation from both parents in the event of separation or divorce.

- If one of the parents in a marriage dies, the law provides financial security not only for the surviving spouse, but for the children as well, by ensuring eligibility to all appropriate entitlements, such as Social Security survivor benefits or employee pensions.

LGBT parents care about the same things that all parents do – hugs and homework, bedtime and bath time. These moms and dads are raising their children to love their country, to tell the truth, to stand up for their friends, and to treat others they way they’d like to be treated. Now is the time for the State of Maryland to show these children that their families are just as respected, valued and protected as all other families. It is time to do what we all know is right. It is time to pass the Civil Marriage Protection Act and ensure that all of Maryland’s families are treated equally under the law.

Thank you.