



# State of Maryland Commission on Civil Rights

*Respect...Integrity...Effective Communication*

December 8, 2025

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## **MARYLAND COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS & OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL ANNOUNCE SETTLEMENT WITH CRACKER BARREL OVER ALLEGATIONS OF DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION INVOLVING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM AT WALDORF RESTAURANT**

Today, the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights (“MCCR”) along with the Office of the Attorney General of Maryland (“OAG”) announce the resolution of a matter that strikes at the heart of who we are – and who we must continue striving to be – as a state committed to equity, dignity, and the full humanity of all people. This agreement, achieved through a strong and united partnership between the MCCR and the OAG’s Civil Rights Division, is more than a legal resolution; it is a moral affirmation that Maryland will never allow the dignity of our children – especially children with disabilities – to be diminished, dismissed, or disregarded.

When a group of students with autism and their teachers walked into a Cracker Barrel restaurant in Waldorf, they were not simply visiting a place of public accommodation, they were exercising their fundamental right to be fully included in the world around them. And when their experience raised serious concerns of differential treatment rooted in disability, MCCR and the OAG moved swiftly and collaboratively, launching a joint investigation grounded in our shared duty to uphold Maryland’s civil rights laws. Because in Maryland, when discrimination threatens even one child, it is a threat to us all.

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### **Statement from MCCR Executive Director Cleveland L. Horton II**

“This settlement underscores a truth we hold as non-negotiable: **inclusion is not optional, and dignity is not discretionary**. The outcome we reached today – strengthened policies, improved training, monetary redress for the affected students and schools, and a formal written apology – was made possible because two state agencies stood shoulder to shoulder in pursuit of justice. Our partnership with the Office of the Attorney General’s Civil Rights Division ensured a thorough, rigorous, and principled process that honored both the letter and the spirit of the law.”

“But let me be clear: our work does not end with the signing of this agreement. This moment must propel us forward with renewed determination. We cannot become complacent in the belief that progress is inevitable. Progress is a choice, a collective one, and it requires courage, vigilance, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable

***“Our vision is to have a State that is free from any trace of unlawful discrimination.”***

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truths. Together with the Office of the Attorney General, the Commission will continue to stand unwavering in that commitment.”

“To the students and families impacted: your courage matters. Your voice matters. Your experience has sparked change that will echo far beyond the walls of one restaurant.”

“To businesses across Maryland: let this serve not as a warning, but as an invitation. An invitation to lead with empathy. To serve with equity. To foster workplaces and public spaces where all Marylanders – those seen and unseen, those whose disabilities are visible and those whose disabilities are not – can participate fully and confidently.”

“And to the people of Maryland: know this – **we will always stand guard over your civil rights.** Through our continued partnership with the Office of the Attorney General, we will work every day to build a state where every child is welcomed, every family is respected, and every individual can live and move through their community without fear of exclusion or discrimination.”

“In moments like this, we reclaim something essential: our shared humanity. And it is through that shared humanity – and through unwavering collaboration across state agencies – that we will continue to build a Maryland where dignity is not just protected by law, but honored in practice.”

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### **Statement from Maryland Attorney General Anthony G. Brown**

“When businesses break the law and fail to treat people with disabilities with the dignity and respect they deserve, my Office will step in and hold them accountable,” said Attorney General Brown. “This settlement compensates these students and their school while requiring Cracker Barrel to update its policies – advancing inclusion and accessibility not just across Maryland, but across the entire country.”

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### **Terms of Settlement & Thanks**

Under the terms of the settlement:

- Cracker Barrel will revise and strengthen its public accommodation policy nationwide to ensure compliance with state and federal disability rights laws.
- Cracker Barrel will pay a total of \$75,000 to the affected students, allocating \$7,500 per child.
- Cracker Barrel will donate \$17,500 to the Dr. James Craik Elementary School SORE and ACHIEVE programs to expand classroom technology, including adaptive learning tools, communication devices, and interactive software designed to support students with developmental disabilities.
- Cracker Barrel will reimburse \$446.56 for the school’s cost of meals purchased and transportation on the day of the incident.
- Cracker Barrel will contribute \$9,000 to the Civil Rights Enforcement Fund, supporting education, outreach, and enforcement efforts across Maryland.

Executive Director Horton and Attorney General Brown applaud the parents of the children for their tireless advocacy and thank Charles County Public School leadership. Additionally, Executive Director Horton and Attorney General Brown thank MCCR Civil Rights Officer Lead Rafael Bowen, as well as Chief Jonathan M. Smith, Assistant Attorney General Janee Fountain, Deputy Chief Rashida Ogletree-George, Assistant Attorney General Julianne Cozzetto, and Chief Investigator Latonya Bishop of the Civil Rights Division for their work.