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Local

Coalition of labor organizations urges Maryland to sever ties to sweatshops

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BALTIMORE -

Maryland spends millions of dollars on state worker uniforms made by companies that employ sweatshop labor, according to a labor advocacy group.

[SweatFree Maryland](#), a coalition of labor organizations advocating for humane working conditions, called on Maryland lawmakers to require vendors to disclose factory locations and adopt a sweat-free code of conduct.

"We should ensure our tax dollars are supporting good jobs and good wages for workers," said Matthew Weinstein, the Baltimore region director for [Progressive Maryland](#), a member of SweatFree Maryland.

Four companies that employ sweatshops contract for the state of Maryland, said Bjørn Claeson, executive director of SweatFree Communities, a national organization that coordinates the local campaigns.

These companies — Bob Barker, [Lion Apparel](#), [Cintas](#) and [Rocky Brands](#) — were among nine uniform manufacturers using 12 factories reviewed in a study released this week by SweatFree Communities.

Researchers found "very abusive factory conditions everywhere," Claeson said, such as forced, unpaid overtime, child labor and verbal and physical abuse.

It is unclear whether goods delivered to Maryland, such as uniforms for correctional officers and transit workers, were made in the factories studied because these companies work with multiple factories, he said.

Maryland spends nearly \$8 million annually on uniforms and apparel for state workers.

Several cities and states have committed to stop the public from purchasing from sweatshops, but more must sign on to create the market for sweatshop-free conditions, Claeson said.

Del. Joanne Benson, D-Prince George's, pushed legislation this past session requiring contractors to adhere to a sweat-free code of conduct and disclose the location of factories, but her bill didn't get out of committee.

Benson vowed to reintroduce the bill this year.

"I just find it reprehensible that we are patronizing companies that are so disrespectful to workers," she said.

Gov. Martin O'Malley supports "disclosure of all kinds" for state contractors, and factory locations would fall under that, said O'Malley's spokesman Shaun Adamec.

Goods produced in America or Maryland fall under federal or state labor guidelines, so "goods sold in Maryland should fall under similar guidelines," he said.

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