



**Testimony for the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
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JOSEPH SPIELBERGER
PUBLIC POLICY COUNSEL

**SB 161 – Crimes – Hate Crimes – Use of an Item or a Symbol to Threaten or
Intimidate**

SUPPORT

AMERICAN CIVIL
LIBERTIES UNION
OF MARYLAND

The ACLU of Maryland supports SB 161, which prohibits a person from affixing, erecting, or placing a noose or swastika on another's property without authorization, with the intent to threaten or intimidate any person or group of people.

MAIN OFFICE
& MAILING ADDRESS
3600 CLIPPER MILL ROAD
SUITE 350
BALTIMORE, MD 21211
T/410-889-8555
or 240-274-5295
F/410-366-7838

It is undeniable that marginalized people and groups continue to be targets of violence, threats, and acts of intimidation. In 2018, there were multiple news reports of nooses and swastikas being placed across Maryland. Efforts to prevent and remedy this egregious conduct are appropriate as long as they are consistent with the First Amendment.

FIELD OFFICE
6930 CARROLL AVENUE
SUITE 610
TAKOMA PARK, MD 20912
T/240-274-5295

SB 161 does not violate the Constitution, because it addresses only unprotected speech and is viewpoint neutral.

WWW.ACLU-MD.ORG

OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS
JOHN HENDERSON
PRESIDENT

DANA VICKERS SHELLEY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

ANDREW FREEMAN
GENERAL COUNSEL

SB 161 criminalizes true threats, which are not constitutionally protected speech. The First Amendment does not protect true threats, which directly threaten individuals, and may include the use of nonverbal symbols, such as a noose or swastika. True threats are statements “where the speaker means to communicate a serious expression of an intent to commit an act of unlawful violence to a particular individual or group of individuals.”¹ In *Virginia v. Black*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Virginia’s ban on cross burning with the intent to intimidate, holding that the statute did not run afoul of the First Amendment because “[t]he person who burns a cross directed at a particular person often is making a serious threat.”² Although that case dealt with cross burnings, the Court held that it is constitutional to regulate certain symbols, that have such a “long and pernicious history as a signal of impending violence,”³ which would include a noose or swastika.

Similarly, because SB 161 criminalizes conduct concerning these symbols that intends to “threaten or intimidate,” it criminalizes true threats, and does not run afoul of the Constitution here.

SB 161 is viewpoint neutral.

The First Amendment does not protect laws that discriminate against viewpoint. Previous attempts by other jurisdictions to criminalize threatening conduct have been struck down because they targeted particular groups for protection, and were therefore viewpoint discriminatory. For example, a Minnesota ordinance prohibiting cross

¹ *Virginia v. Black*, 538 U.S. 343, 344 (2003).

² *Id.*, at 357.

³ *Id.*, at 344.

burnings and other displays was found viewpoint discriminatory, and thus unconstitutional, because it specifically prohibited targeting people on the basis of race, color, religion, or gender.⁴ Here, SB 161 addresses conduct targeting “any person or group of persons.” The bill does not single out any particular group, and is therefore viewpoint neutral and constitutional.

For the foregoing reasons, we urge a favorable report on SB 161.

⁴ *R.A.V. v. St. Paul*, 505 U.S. 377 (1992).

