

SB 1034 - Favorable

February 28, 2020

Re: Support Enhanced Penalties For Sports Official Assault  
Senate Bills 1034 and 691

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Dear Senators:

On behalf of the Maryland State Soccer Referee Committee (SRC), I urge Committee approval and Senate passage for legislation that supports referees and clarifies appropriate criminal penalties for assault against referees in all sports. Senate Bills 1034 and 691 are good bills.

Physical assault is an extreme problem. It can be partially addressed by increasing the penalty to a felony, while retaining common law discretion for prosecutors and judges to address the action and injuries case by case.

The Maryland Soccer Referee Committee trains approximately 700 new entry level referees and 1,800 returning referees every year. It trains them, tests them, and certifies them. We also train and test assigners, test the physical fitness of our advanced referees, and are proud of our many members who seek and receive additional training for high school, college, and professional games. Through their own contracting entities, our certified assigners schedule referees for more than 40,000 games annually. For more information about us, please see our website, [www.marylandreferee.com](http://www.marylandreferee.com).

Three instances of physical assault in Maryland against sports officials have come to our attention this year. First, a physical assault against a soccer referee was determined to be non-prosecutable in December 2019. The SRC is still investigating what it can do. Second, a baseball umpire for a 14 year old game was assaulted by a spectator, presumably a parent from the visiting team at a Baltimore City diamond in the Fall 2019. The umpire's association is still working with the teams to identify the perpetrator and is contracting you separately. Third, in an adult regional soccer match this Fall between teams from Maryland and Massachusetts, at half-time, an assistant coach (or parent-spectator) ran approximately 50 yards onto the field to punch the referee in the head. The referee terminated the match, walked to the ambulance at the firehouse next the field, and now is receiving treatment for a concussion. We understand that a trial in the criminal case is scheduled for March 12, 2020. We will report more after that.

Verbal assault and abuse are the leading causes of attrition among soccer referees. They are the reason the SRC needs to train 700 new referees annually, just to (almost) keep up with the need. A survey from the National Association of Sports Officials (<https://www.naso.org/survey/>) reports that nearly 48% of male officials have felt unsafe or feared for their safety in connection to officiating and that nearly 45% of female officials have felt unsafe or feared for their safety in connection to officiating. For now, our ability to attract younger persons to referee has been seriously hurt. NASO's survey reports that the average starting age for a sports official is now 40-45 years old. Thirty years ago, the average starting age for a sports official was 20-25 years old. Through "zero tolerance" policies with the Maryland state adult and youth soccer associations and the leagues, referees are working hard to stop verbal assaults and improve sportsmanship in youth and adult soccer. Still, though, at many public high school varsity games in football, basketball, and soccer, it is routine to have two uniformed police officers in attendance, in addition to a designated school administrator.

The new Senate Bill and SB 691 are important steps in recognizing the problem and attaching appropriate consequences to those who physically assault sports officials.

Very truly yours

Greg Watson  
Maryland State Soccer Referee Administrator