



**SENATE BILL 956**

***Criminal Law – Threats to Public Officials***

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS COMMITTEE**

**Nilesh Kalyanarman, MD, Health Officer, Anne Arundel County**

*Position: – Support – March 16, 2022*

The Maryland Association of County Health Officers (MACHO) is in **strong support of Senate Bill 956**. In March 2020, facing what would soon become the most significant public health crisis of our time, local Health Officers across the country raced to implement life-saving prevention and mitigation measures in response to the emergence and rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of this pandemic, some members of our communities have disagreed with measures implemented by elected and appointed officials to address the pandemic. Although most people with contrary views have expressed their differences civilly, a small but significant number have acted out with threatening behavior toward elected officials and public health officials. While elected officials already receive protections against threats under Criminal Law Section 3-708, public health officials do not. SB 956 aims to extend this legal protection to public health professionals.

The level of harassment and intimidation toward public health officials and local health department (LHD) staff during the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented. We understand and respect the fact that the public has a right to responsibly speak out on any issue. However, when individuals engage in threatening behaviors that impede our ability to carry out emergency response measures, these actions become a threat to everyone's safety and should not be tolerated. Maryland's local Health Officers and their regulatory enforcement staff have been subject to threats of harm against themselves, and in some cases, their families. Public health professionals are legally bound to carry out the will of the Maryland General Assembly, the Governor, and Secretaries of Health and the Environment. Health Officers and licensed professionals employed at LHDs are hired based on extensive knowledge and specific expertise critical to protecting the health and safety of our communities. Our actions are not about controlling people; they are based on science, evidence, and the law. We realize these decisions may not be popular across the spectrum, but they are necessary to protect health and save lives.

Many Health Officers have received threats, often through social media, along with in-person acts of harassment and intimidation resulting from our legally required duties. In numerous instances, environmental health staff from LHDs have needed law enforcement escorts to carry out their duties because of overt threats. Maryland is one of a few states that lacks specific protection for public health officials and staff. There has been no deterrent to those threatening us harm, so these acts continue. Eight Health Officers and many more public health professionals have left their positions in Maryland during the past two years. Many of these resignations were directly or indirectly spurred by threats suffered in the workplace. At no time should it be acceptable for dedicated professionals to be subjected to emotional and physical threats, but this is especially problematic in an era of workforce shortages. Unaddressed threats also impact our ability to recruit and retain qualified Health Officers and LHD staff, further impacting workforce shortages. SB 956 will not only provide public health professionals with protection equivalent to that currently afforded elected officials, but it will make Maryland a safer state by ensuring a more supportive workplace for its physicians, nurses, and environmental health specialists who dedicate their careers to the well-being of others.

MACHO urges a favorable and timely report on SB 956. For more information, please contact Ruth Maiorana, Executive Director, MACHO, at [rmaiora1@jhu.edu](mailto:rmaiora1@jhu.edu) or 410-937-1433.