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Testimony of Ramya Swami, Manager, State Policy
Support for HB 0580
Before the Maryland House of Delegates Ways and Means Committee
February 21, 2023

Chair Atterbeary, Vice-Chair Wilkins, and Distinguished Members of the Maryland House of Delegates Ways and Means Committee,

Founded in 1974, Brady works across Congress, courts, and communities, uniting gun owners and non-gun owners alike, to take action, not sides, and end America's gun violence epidemic. Our organization today carries the name of Jim Brady, who was shot and severely injured in the assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan. Jim and his wife, Sarah, led the fight to pass federal legislation requiring background checks for gun sales. Brady continues to uphold Jim and Sarah's legacy by uniting Americans from coast to coast, red and blue, young and old, liberal and conservative, to combat the epidemic of gun violence.

Thank you for allowing us to submit testimony before this committee today. **HB 0580 will protect Maryland residents from an armed threat to one of America's most valuable democratic institutions: voting.** Now more than ever, voter intimidation is a legitimate concern for future elections; it falls to state and local officials to take proactive steps to ensure the laws are enforced, hence why this bill is so incredibly important.

Allowing firearms at polling stations is voter intimidation, plain and simple. The presence of guns at or around polling places poses a danger to the process of fair and free elections simply because of the inherent threat to voters' emotional and physical well-being. Voter intimidation is not only dangerous, it is unlawful. It is against the law to engage in any efforts to intimidate, threaten, or coerce a voter to vote or not vote, or to vote for or against a particular candidate.¹ Voter intimidation or suppression has many forms but the most dangerous form is *armed* intimidation, which further contributes to the growing gun violence epidemic in our nation.² Armed intimidation threatens one of our most fundamental rights in democracy's most sensitive location - the voting booth.

The bill before you today - HB 0580 - would prohibit bringing a firearm within 100 feet of a polling site during an election, and prevents individuals from carrying or displaying a firearm on the premises of a

¹ 52 U.S.C. §§ 10101(b), 10307(b).

² Allison Anderman, Protecting Democracy from Armed Intimidation: A Guide for States, Giffords Law Center, Sep. 16, 2022,

<https://giffords.org/lawcenter/report/protecting-democracy-from-armed-intimidation-a-guide-for-states/>.

privately or publicly owned building being used as a polling site, including in parking lots. Ensuring that individuals are not confronted with firearms in an intimidating or threatening manner while exercising their sacred right at the ballot box is of utmost importance to preserving and defending all tenets of our democracy.

Threats of armed intimidation have grown in size and scale, and these threats have directly impacted the lives of Maryland. This issue is one that has plagued a variety of states, and is of chief concern for law enforcement officers and election officials alike. Two months prior to the 2020 election, the United States Department of Homeland Security released a draft threat assessment that asserted “open-air, publicly accessible parts of physical election infrastructure,” including polling places and voter registration events, could be “flash points for potential violence.”³

This bill poses no threat to the Second Amendment rights of Marylanders, as the Supreme Court has recognized that the prohibition of guns in sensitive places - in this case, polling places - is one of several “presumptively lawful regulatory measures.”⁴ There are common sense solutions that we know are necessary to protect the electoral rights of the people of Maryland at such a fragile time in our republic, and this bill is one of them.

The rate of firearm ownership has grown exponentially alongside deepening ideological divides; this potent combination has led to the proliferation and increased threat of extremist militia organizations nationwide that continue to use firearms in threatening and intimidating ways, including near or at polling locations or outside recount locations. Clear instances of armed voter intimidation plagued the 2020 election⁵ and public officials must assume that this behavior will continue in order to best protect their constituents. Proactive steps like HB 0580 must be taken to ensure the safety and security of our electorate.

For all of these reasons, Brady strongly encourages this Committee to vote in favor of HB 0580 to protect all Maryland voters from encountering armed intimidation at polling places and ensuring that our democratic processes remain free and fair. This action is necessary and within your authority to ensure that voters in your state are protected and can vote safely and without intimidation or risk.

Sincerely,
Ramya Swami

³ Danny Hakim, et al., Trump Renews Fears of Voter Intimidation as G.O.P. Poll Watchers Mobilize, The New York Times, Sep. 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/30/us/trump-election-poll-watchers.html>.

⁴ See *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 544 U.S. 570, 627 n.26 (2008).

⁵ Tom Porter, *Trump supporters staged a rally at a Virginia polling center during early voting, intimidating voters, election officials say*, BUSINESS INSIDER (Sep. 20, 2020), <https://www.businessinsider.com/virginia-trump-supporters-intimidated-voters-disrupt-early-voting-2020-9>