

**Testimony of Karen Baynes-Dunning
Interim President and CEO, Southern Poverty Law Center
before the Maryland Senate**

**Support for Maryland Senate Bill 606, Criminal Law – Hate Crimes – Bases (2nd
Lieutenant Richard Collins III’s Law)
February 11, 2020**

My name is Karen Baynes-Dunning, and I currently serve as the interim president and chief executive officer of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The Southern Poverty Law Center supports Maryland Senate Bill 606, Criminal Law – Hate Crimes – Bases (2nd Lieutenant Richard Collins III’s Law), introduced by Senators Benson, Sydnor, Griffith, Lee, Paterson and Smith.

I am a former juvenile court judge, serving in Atlanta, GA, but the origins of my career in civil rights and social justice began right here in the great state of Maryland. I am a proud alumnae of the Montgomery County public school system. It was in the home of my parents, Percy and Dorothy Baynes, the First Baptist Church of Washington, DC, in my community and school system that I developed my own values of justice, equity, and integrity. As Marylander, I have always held the belief that we are a diverse state that celebrates the power of our collective.

For more than four decades, the Southern Poverty Law Center—a Montgomery, Alabama-based civil rights organization with offices in five Southern states and the District of Columbia—has been monitoring, issuing reports about, and training law enforcement officials on extremist activity in the United States. Each year since 1990, we have conducted an annual census of active hate groups operating across the U.S., a list that is used extensively by journalists, law enforcement agencies and scholars, among others.

Without question, in our country today there is an escalating crisis of hate-related violence. These are no longer isolated incidents. There are no lone wolves. We are well past the point of cautionary tales. Each senseless act after senseless act is intertwined and connected by bigotry and a callous disregard for human life.

We are here today because on May 20, 2017, 2nd Lt. Richard Collins III was visiting the University of Maryland at College Park with two friends. He was murdered that day, by a young white male who was a member of the Facebook group “Art Reich Nation” and had racist memes saved on his cellphone. Although he was ultimately found guilty of murder, the hate crime charge was dropped during trial. Hate should not have to be the sole factor in a crime for a defendant to be charged with a hate crime.

Each year, across America, an average of [250,000 people are victimized](#) by hate crimes – criminal expressions of bigotry, that terrorize entire communities and tear at the social fabric of our country.

As [defined by the FBI](#), a hate crime is a “criminal offense against a person or property” – such as murder, arson, assault or vandalism – that is “motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity.”

The killing of 2nd Lt. Richard Collins III fits in a growing pattern of racially motivated murders and hate crimes.

- In April 2019, a 19-year-old nursing student in San Diego [murdered Lori Kaye inside Chabad of Poway](#) on the last day of Passover, while injuring three others.
- Five months before Poway, in Pittsburgh, 11 people were [murdered at the Tree of Life synagogue](#).
- In June 2015, a 21-year-old white nationalist who posed in pictures with handguns and the Confederate flag [murdered nine worshipers at the historic “Mother Emanuel”](#) African Methodist Episcopal Church during their prayer group.

FBI statistics show 30% increase in hate crimes during the three-year period ending in 2017, and last year, violent hate crimes reached an all-time high.

The Southern Poverty Law Center urges support for the 2nd Lt. Richard Collins III Act. This bill amends Maryland’s hate crime definition to mirror the FBI’s definition and ensure crimes motivated, whole or in part, by discrimination against the victim’s immutable characteristics are classified accordingly. Further, it will strengthen Maryland’s ability to prosecute hate crimes and address the escalation of hate-related violence.

When these violent acts against individuals and small groups of people happen, the 24-hour news cycle moves on and so do we. But if we take the time to connect the dots, the urgency of addressing this crisis of hate becomes even more paramount.

This is the right thing to do. This is the Maryland that I am proud to claim as home. We are and should remain an example for the nation of what can happen when people of values and integrity come together for the greater good.

Thank you.