



## **Senate Bill 956**

### *Criminal Law - Threats to Public Officials*

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**

To: Judicial Proceedings Committee

Date: March 16, 2022

From: D'Paul Nibber

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS** SB 956. This bill extends criminal penalties for threats leveled against county health officers, election administrators, and building and housing inspectors as they attempt to carry out their duties. For the 2022 legislative session, MACo has prioritized the well-being of public-facing civil servants as one of its four initiatives. Especially during a pandemic, no frontline civil servant should be subject to a work environment made even more difficult due to threats and harassment.

In late 2021, The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) pressed the federal government to intervene and protect local public health officials from threats of violence. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these officials have been subject to heightened pressures and scrutiny for actions taken to save lives. The resulting impact has been devastating.

NACCHO reports more than 300 public health department leaders have left their posts throughout the pandemic. In Maryland, two prominent health officers resigned during this same period. The Maryland Association of County Health Officers, an affiliate organization of MACo's, reports threats and harassment to its members have increased in volume and intensity in response to decisions made to protect the public from the COVID-19 virus.

Similarly, election officials have found themselves under assault. According to a recent Brennan Center for Justice poll, one in six local election officials have experienced threats because of their job, and 30% of polled election workers know a fellow worker who left their position because of fear for their safety, increased threats, or intimidation.

Even prior to the pandemic, housing and building code enforcement officials experienced significant levels of harassment on the job. The American Association of Code Enforcement estimates at least ten code enforcement officials lost their lives within the last 20 years issuing warnings or citations, and significantly more survived assaults and received regular threats. In Maryland, county officials have noted difficulty retaining code enforcement officials due to increased workplace hostility.

In response, the State should both protect and reaffirm the importance of our civil servants, who, in turn, protect both our well-being and democratic principles. For this reason, MACo **SUPPORTS** SB 956 and urges a **FAVORABLE** report.