

RON WATSON, PH.D
Legislative District 23
Prince George's County

Judicial Proceedings Committee



James Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street, Room 121
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
301-858-3631 · 410-841-3631
800-492-7122 Ext. 3631
Fax 301-858-3174 · 410-841-3174
Ron.Watson@senate.state.md.us

The Senate of Maryland

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

March 16, 2022

To Chairman Smith, Vice-Chair Waldstreicher, and the members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present this bill before you today.

Senate Bill 956 is a simple piece of legislation. It expands existing state law protecting elected officials from threats to include local health officers, elections officials, and housing and building inspectors. This bill is not intended to stifle free speech and debate, but instead to promote it through civil discourse. Some may question why include just these three categories of civil servants. The simplest answer is that our counties collectively agreed that these workers experience the gravest and most frequent threats to their well-being in the line of duty. The need for this bill is so great that the Maryland Association of Counties' leadership made it one of their four initiatives for the 2022 legislative session.

Recent news and data supports their position. Since the coronavirus pandemic began two years ago, the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) reports more than 300 public health department leaders have left their posts. In Maryland, seven county health officers have departed. At every level of government, threats have been cited as a reason for leaving.

Our elections officials are under similar assault. Just last Thursday, March 10th, the Brennan Center for Justice published a poll stating, "One in six election officials have experienced threats because of their job, and 77 percent say that they feel these threats have increased in recent years." Worse yet, "30 percent of the officials in our poll know of one or more election workers who have left at least in part because of fear for their safety, increased threats, or intimidation. In the long term, 60 percent of officials are concerned that threats, harassment, and intimidation against local election officials will make it difficult to retain and recruit election workers ... 20 percent plan to leave before the 2024 election."

Similar to health officers and elections officials, our code enforcement officers experience regular harassment and threats on the job. To fully appreciate how difficult this work is, there are multiple reports from the American Association of Code Enforcement of these officers being killed or brutally assaulted in the line of duty.

On your floor systems, you can read testimony from representatives of each civil servant category named in this bill. Their stories and experiences are a stark reminder of the dangerous and polarizing times we live in, and why this bill is so necessary.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge your favorable vote on Senate Bill 956.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ron L. Watson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "R".

Senator Ron Watson

Legislative District 23